

## Tilburg University

### Spirited performance

van der Heide, N.

*Publication date:*  
2008

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
van der Heide, N. (2008). *Spirited performance: The Manas epic and society in Kyrgyzstan*. Rozenberg.

#### General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

#### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

## **Spirited Performance**

The Manas epic and society in Kyrgyzstan

© 2008 N. van der Heide

Cover design by: Esther van Efferink  
Photography by: Timothy Scott  
Photographs of: Great Manaschī Kaba Atabekov and Manaschī Talantaalī Bakchiev

All rights reserved. Save exceptions stated by the law, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system of any nature, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, included a complete or partial transcription, without the prior written permission of the author, application for which should be addressed to the author.

ISBN 978 90 5170 833 2

# **Spirited Performance**

## **The Manas epic and society in Kyrgyzstan**

Proefschrift ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor  
aan de Universiteit van Tilburg

op het gezag van de rector magnificus, prof.dr. F.A. van der Duyn Schouten

in het openbaar te verdedigen ten overstaan van een door het college voor promoties  
aangewezen commissie in de aula van de Universiteit  
op vrijdag 6 juni 2008 om 14.15 uur

door

Nienke van der Heide  
geboren op 16 december 1970 te Amersfoort

Promotor: Prof.dr. A. de Ruijter  
Copromotor: Dr. J.J. de Wolf

I dedicate this book to  
the Great Manaschī Kaba Atabekov  
who passed away on March 29, 2008.



## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>A note on Spelling.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Maps .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Introduction    The Manas Epic, new access to an ancient oral tradition in a present-day context.....</b>	<b>17</b>
I.1    Text and Context .....	19
I.2    The Manas Epic in its Social Contexts .....	20
I.3    Structure of this Study .....	25
<b>Chapter One      Kyrgyzstan: Remarkably Unknown .....</b>	<b>27</b>
1.1    Kyrgyzstan introduced.....	27
1.1.1    Kyrgyzstan Located .....	28
1.1.2    History of Kyrgyzstan .....	29
1.1.2.1    Before the Soviet Union .....	31
1.1.2.2    The Soviet Union.....	37
1.1.2.3    After the Soviet Union.....	41
1.1.3    Economy .....	43
1.1.4    Social Organisation of the Kyrgyz: Family Structure and Politics .....	49
1.1.5    Ethnicity, religion and language .....	55
1.2    Research Methodology .....	60
1.2.1    Background of the Research.....	60
1.2.2    Research Questions .....	61
1.2.3    Research methods and information sources .....	63
1.3    Social context of my fieldwork .....	67
1.3.1    Kazı́bek.....	67
1.3.2    Törtkǘl .....	75
1.3.3    Karakol .....	77
1.3.4    Bishkek .....	79
1.4    The story of Manas .....	82
1.4.1    Introduction to the plot .....	83
1.4.2    Manas’ Birth.....	86
1.4.3    Manas’ turbulent childhood.....	87
1.4.4    Manas becomes Khan.....	88
1.4.5    Manas fights and falls in love.....	88
1.4.6    Manas meets his closest friend Almambet .....	90
1.4.7    Manas marries Khanikey .....	91
1.4.8    Kökötöi’s memorial feast .....	92
1.4.9    The Great Campaign.....	95
1.4.10    Manas’ death.....	96



<b>Chapter two</b>	<b>The Oral Performance of the Manas Epic.....</b>	<b>99</b>
2.1	Who are Manaschīs?.....	101
2.2	How to Become a Manaschī.....	111
2.2.1	The Vocation Dream .....	111
2.2.2	Vocation and Inspiration .....	121
2.2.3	Apprenticeship.....	123
2.2.3.1	Manaschī School .....	126
2.2.4	Comparing with Parry and Lord.....	128
2.3	Manaschīs and Energy.....	133
2.4	Different Manaschīs, different versions .....	137
2.5	Social Status of Manaschīs .....	141
2.6	Audiences .....	150
2.7	Is the oral performance of the Manas epic dying out? .....	157
<b>Chapter Three</b>	<b>The Manas Published .....</b>	<b>163</b>
3.1	Publications of the Manas Epic before the Soviet Union.....	163
3.1.1	Majmu-at-Tavarikh.....	163
3.1.2	Recordings by Chokan Chīngīzovich Valikhanov .....	167
3.1.3	Recordings by Friedrich Wilhelm Radloff .....	174
3.2	Publications of the Manas During Soviet Times .....	178
3.2.1	Kayum Miftakov .....	178
3.2.2	İbīrayīm Abdīrahmanov .....	179
3.2.3	Institutionalisation .....	182
3.2.4	The crisis of the Turkic epics .....	187
3.2.5	Combined version, 1958-1960 .....	194
3.2.6	The versions of Sagīmbai and Sayakbai.....	197
3.2.7	Russian Translations.....	202
3.2.8	English translations .....	203
3.2.9	Illustrations .....	204
3.2.10	Scholarly debates .....	207
3.3	Publications of the Manas After the Soviet Union .....	209
3.3.1	Scholarly Editions .....	210
3.3.2	English translations .....	210
3.3.3	Theodor Herzen's illustrations .....	212
3.3.4	Mambet Chokmorov.....	213
3.3.5	Festival Material.....	214
3.3.6	Schoolbooks .....	215
3.3.7	Private editions .....	215
3.4	Manas books and their audience.....	216
3.5	Other Manas-Inspired Art Forms .....	218
3.5.1	Chīngīz Aitmatov .....	220

<b>Chapter four</b>	<b>The Use of the Manas Epic in Politics .....</b>	<b>225</b>
4.1	Politics and the Manas before the Soviet Union.....	225
4.1.1	A Tool for Whom? .....	225
4.1.2	Ethnicity in the Manas tales of Radloff and Valikhanov.....	229
4.1.3	Manas becomes Kyrgyz.....	241
4.2	The Soviets and Ethnicity .....	243
4.3	After the Soviet Union.....	254
4.3.1	The Political Arena After Independence: Ethnic and Civic Models of Statehood.....	254
4.3.2	The language question .....	261
4.3.3	The Manas Epic and Ethnic and Civic Models of Statehood.....	267
4.3.3.1	The Manas Epic since Independence: a Kyrgyz hero of a Kyrgyz epic	267
4.3.3.2	The Manas Epic in the Hands of the Government .....	271
4.3.3.3	The Manas Epic and its Political Significance to the Audience.....	279
4.3.3.4	The political use of Manas Epic and Manaschīs .....	288
<b>Chapter five</b>	<b>Conclusions.....</b>	<b>291</b>
5.1	Form .....	292
5.2	Content .....	294
5.3	Time.....	296
5.4	Purpose .....	299
5.5	Actors .....	301
5.6	Meaning .....	303
<b>Glossary</b>	<b>.....</b>	<b>305</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>.....</b>	<b>311</b>
<b>Samenvatting</b>	<b>.....</b>	<b>321</b>
<b>Curriculum Vitae</b>	<b>.....</b>	<b>334</b>



## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to an extended circle of people for their vital contributions to the realisation of this study. At the top of this list are, of course, the Manaschīs with whom I worked during my fieldwork. Without their cooperation, openness and exceptional hospitality I could not have begun to grasp the complexity of the Manas epic and its social significance. Great Manaschī Kaba Atabekov, who treated me as a granddaughter, taught me the heart of Manas recital and showed me how the Manas epic is embedded in his daily life. I was deeply saddened by the tidings of his death one week before this book went to the printer's. Manaschī Talantaalī Bakchiev, my dear friend, taught me the passion involved in Manas recital. Furthermore, as Talantaalī continually aimed at finding common ground during our countless conversations and discussions, he became an invaluable instructor and sparring partner. Manaschī Urkash Mambetaliev taught me the joy of Manas recital. Manaschī Kanımbübü Abraimova and Manaschī Azat taught me respect for Manas recital, each from their individual experiences.

I feel greatly indebted to a large number of other people in Kyrgyzstan who have offered me their hospitality, insights and friendship. I wish to thank my host family in the village Kazıbek, my friend Ainura Malabekova and her relatives, my friend Elvira Karıpbaeva, Kaba Atabekov's wife Söken-*apa*, the painter Mairamkul Asanaliyev, my three Kyrgyz teachers Zina Karaeva, Mirlan Aitkulov and Dinara Alıмова. I also wish to thank Gülnara Aitpaeva, Damira Sıdıkova, Token Akılbekova and Cholpon Orozbekova for sharing their ideas and friendship.

Of the non-Kyrgyzstani people with whom I have worked and shared the pleasures and difficulties of living in Kyrgyzstan, I would like to express particular gratitude to Britta Korth, Sarah Amsler, Timothy Scott, Davis Broach, Filiz Kılıç, Nick Megoran, Mirjam Leutze and Kirsten Verpaalen.

Scholarly support I have received from various people and institutions, whom I thank sincerely for all their contributions. I thank the VSB Fonds for making my first visit to Kyrgyzstan in 1996/1997 possible. The Amsterdam School for Social Science Research has played a crucial role in the materialisation of this study by admitting me into their

Ph.D. programme. I thank especially dr. Gerd Baumann, prof.dr. Anton Blok and dr. Hans Sonneveld for their trust, support and intellectual input.

Illness forced me to lay aside my work after the second year of field research. The end result of this study might never have seen the light if I had not coincidentally encountered my undergraduate supervisor dr. Jan de Wolf four years later. He encouraged me to apply for a scholarship and to write the book that was left unfinished. I am grateful to the Koninklijke Hollandsche Maatschappij der Wetenschappen for granting me the Pieter Langerhuizen Lambertszoon fund. I owe Jan de Wolf for his inspiring supervision and unceasing encouragement. I thank prof.dr. Arie de Ruijter for his enthusiasm and critical eye.

I am grateful to Regina Weiss for proofreading the manuscript and to Timothy Scott for providing a number of his beautiful photographs.

Lastly, I wish to thank from the bottom of my heart my family and friends who have supported me during all the ups and downs that I encountered in the process of writing this study. I doubt that this book could have been written without their presence and support. I thank my parents for raising me with all their love and care, for letting me discover my own ways in life and for staying close to me during every stage. I also thank my father for his valuable comments on the manuscript. I wish to thank my husband Jan Breg for his emotional, intellectual and moral support, and for creating the lay-out of maps, tables and text. Also, I want to thank my daughter Vivianne for being there.

## A note on Spelling

Kyrgyz and Russian words are transliterated into the Latin alphabet. Generally, this transliteration speaks for itself. The exceptions are explained below.

Language	Cyrillic	Latin	Pronounced as
Russian	ы	y	y in physics
Kyrgyz	ы	ï	e in the
	ө	ö	eu in peu (French)
	ү	ü	ü in über (German)
Kyrgyz and Russian	х	kh	ch in loch (Scottish)

In the words Кыргыз (*Kyrgyz*) and Кыргызстан (*Kyrgyzstan*), the ы is commonly transliterated as y in stead of ï. I have followed this convention.



Map 1 Kyrgyzstan in Eurasia



Map 2 Kyrgyzstan. Fieldwork locations are underlined.





## **Introduction    The Manas Epic, new access to an ancient oral tradition in a present-day context**

The break-up of the Soviet Union, the dissolution of the Iron Curtain and the opening of the borders of the newly independent countries brought an enormous area with fascinating geography, history and culture into the reach of scientists, scholars, journalists and travellers. For most of the twentieth century, when information gathering and processing was becoming a large-scale industry in the West, the republics of the Soviet Union were a no-go area for the vast majority of academics and journalists. For information they had to rely on pre-Soviet material, information that was disseminated by the Soviet government and on secondary sources<sup>1</sup>. Very few Western academics and journalists were prepared to overcome the barrier of information scarcity to work on areas such as Siberia and Central Asia. A number of scholars would have loved to do research in the Soviet Union, but failed to obtain access. Milman Parry, a linguist famous for his description of the use of formulae in oral poetic reciting, was set on studying the oral epics of Central Asia. It was Radloff's study of the Manas poems of the Kara-Kyrgyz that had sparked his interest in living oral traditions. When field research in Central Asia proved to be impossible, he turned to Yugoslavia instead for his ground breaking research. Thus, very few people outside the Soviet Union ever heard of the Manas epic, an elaborate set of heroic tales about the hero Manas.

In 1991, however, the situation of isolation changed. The doors to the former Soviet Union opened and outside observers looked around the corner. For those who turned their attention to the Manas, the epic displayed four distinctive, intriguing features. The first was that the Manas is passed on through a living and lively oral tradition. Even today, there is a core of Manas narrators called *Manaschi*, who give recitals at festivals and Manas competitions. *Manaschi*<sup>2</sup> also recite at social gatherings or in schools and universities, and their recitals are broadcasted on radio and television. There are *Manaschi* of all generations, all with their own version of the Manas epic, reaching audiences of all generations.

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, the Central Asian Review based a study on cultural life in Kyrgyzstan on advertisements in local newspapers (*Entertainment*, 1964:280-292).

<sup>2</sup> The Kyrgyz plural is *Manaschilar*. For reasons of readability, I use the anglicised version.

The second interesting aspect of the Manas epic that stands out is its length. Kyrgyz people often boast that the Manas is longer than the Odyssey and Iliad taken together, counting more than half a million verses. This precise quantification of the epic is based on the recorded and published version of one particular Manaschi and since then has come to live a life of its own. In fact, the oral nature of the epic makes it impossible to reduce the Manas to a certain number of lines. Every Manaschi has his or her own versions of the story, and each recital is a product of improvisation. Every performance, then, is unique. But also the written versions of the Manas are manifold, with different authors, different verses and different episodes. More accurately, the Manas is described to '*bütböit*': it does not end.

A third important feature of the Manas epic is its close affiliation with the supernatural. The spirit (*arbak*) of Manas, his relatives and his companions are seen to have an important influence on the way the epic is recited. The spirits (*arbaktar*) are the ones who call the Manaschis to their profession. They are believed to inspire Manaschis in dreams and visions, and if someone misuses the Manas epic, they punish them with death or illness. Manas recitals are therefore more than artistic expressions that entertain and pass on information, they are also a way of making contact with the supernatural world.

The fourth distinctive feature of the Manas epic is its political value. Over a century ago, tellers of the Manas epic were closely allied with local leaders, enhancing the status of their patrons with a good recital and referring to current political events in their telling. The Soviet governments treated the Manas epic according to the political fashion of the time. At times, the epic was promoted and actively developed as a national tradition, at other times it was censured and portrayed as feudal and islamist. With independence, the epic gained new meaning. It was employed to fill the ideological gap left with the demise of communism. The epic was now the symbol for unity of the Kyrgyz people and it served as the source for new ideological guidelines.

All of these elements make the Manas epic an interesting topic for study. It has importance for linguists, students of literature, historians and political scientists. The present study of the Manas epic takes an anthropological approach that focuses on situated knowledge about the Manas epic. The main concern of this study is therefore the perspectives of the participants in the creation, performance and reception of the Manas epic. I will explore how they attribute significance to the epic, as I seek answers to the questions: what does the Manas epic *mean* to various actors in the field? How are they

familiarised with the epic and its imagery? And lastly, how do they disseminate their personal views on the contents and meanings of the epic to the people around them?

## **I.1 Text and Context**

Text and context are strongly interwoven. On the one hand, a text<sup>3</sup> is built up of linguistic and stylistic elements from that context. The specific forms chosen by artists to express their creative potential derive from interaction with their specific social and cultural context. The performance of art also happens within a set of traditions and customs – even if the custom is to break through traditions – and is enabled or impaired by social factors such as economics and politics. On the other hand, a text also influences the context in which it is consumed. Texts that offer new perspectives on the status quo, as well as texts that reiterate prevalent ideas, help shape the context in which the text is received. This happens on all levels: the use of either traditional or innovative styles affects the literary context, the social status of the creator of the text influences ideas on who has the right to express certain messages, a message that contests or supports dominant ideologies influences people's opinions.

According to Bauman and Briggs, the study of the intricate relationship between text and context is not without pitfalls. They identify two major problems inherent in the concept of context: inclusiveness and false objectivity (Bauman and Briggs, 1990:68). It has proved to be impossible to create a definition of 'the context' that has definite boundaries and that demarcates a workable field for study. 'The context' can be expanded limitlessly, and the choice for what to include and exclude is often arbitrary. The second and related problem of false objectivity is described by Bauman and Briggs as follows:

... positivistic definitions construe context as a set of discourse external conditions that exist prior to and independently of the performance. This undermines the analyst's ability to discern how the participants themselves determine which aspects of the ongoing social interaction are relevant. It also obscures the manner in which speech shapes the setting, often transforming social relations. Reifying 'the context' also implicitly preserves the premise that meaning essentially springs from context-free propositional content, which is then modified or clarified by 'the context' (ibid.).

---

<sup>3</sup> The meaning of the word 'text' here incorporates written as well as spoken forms of verbal communication.

Bauman and Briggs therefore follow authors who propose a shift from product to process, from *context* to *contextualisation*. Furthermore, they distinguish an intriguing aspect of the relationship between text and context, namely the transferability of a text to a context outside the environment in which it was created. This aspect is made up of two processes, which they term *decontextualisation* and *recontextualisation*. A Manas performance in a theatre in Paris incorporates these processes: the text is performed in a new context without a problem, but in the dynamics between text and the new context, a number of stylistic forms change, financial and social rewards are expressed differently, and meanings awarded to the performance by narrator and audience are transformed considerably.

In this study, I will therefore not only describe a number of significant elements of the social contexts in which the Manas epic plays a role, I will also describe processes of interaction between the Manas epic as a text and its social context. This interaction is obviously not engaged in by the text or context themselves, but is brought about by actors. Over the years, the Manas epic has been performed in a number of highly diverse social contexts, in which it was endowed with a series of highly diverse meanings.

## **I.2 The Manas Epic in its Social Contexts**

In contemporary Kyrgyzstan, the Manas epic is one of the most, if not the most, famous pieces of art. It is hard, and probably impossible, to find a Kyrgyzstani citizen who has not heard of the epic and who does not know at least a little bit about it. Children are taught about the Manas epic in school. The Manas epic is often referred to in the various media. Landmarks remind the people of the Manas epic: an important avenue in Bishkek is called Manas Prospekt and the statues outside the Philharmonic building are of Manas, his friends and famous Manaschīs. In the late 1990s, virtually every kiosk in the capital had a painting of Manas on a horse or the words ‘Manas 1,000’ on them, a reminder of the celebration of the 1,000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the epic in 1995. There was even a billboard poster that combined Coca Cola and Manas at a crossroads in Bishkek (see figure 1.1). Also foreign visitors very soon find out what and who Manas is. The international airport carries the name of Manas and virtually all tourist guide books and internet sites mention the Manas epic and its oral performance.



*Figure 1.1 Manas and Coca Cola*  
*Photography: Tim Scott*

The epic appeals to many different people for different reasons. First, there is the recital of the epic that is performed by Manaschīs. The term Manaschī is applied to a variety of Manas reciters. During my field research, I found an implicit distinction between two types of Manaschī: real Manaschīs (*chinīgi Manaschīlar*) and those who learn the epic by heart from a book (*jattama Manaschīlar*). Real Manaschīs improvise while they recite, feeling inspired by the spirit of Manas during their recital. They tell a story of how they were called to their profession. This story usually includes a dream at the age of eleven or twelve, where the spirits of characters from the Manas epic came to them, gave them something white to drink and told them to recite the epic. If they refused their calling, they fell ill and did not heal until they accepted their calling. From the time of their vocation

dream onwards, Manaschīs will have dreams of events of the epic, which enables them to tell their own version of the epic. During their recitals they often feel a connection with the other world. Manaschīs recite their epic for various audiences. Urkash Mambetaliev is a Manaschī who works for the Bishkek *Philharmonia* and whose recitals are programmed in night shows of Kyrgyz art. There are a number of Manas competitions, where Manaschīs recite in theatre settings and are judged by a jury. Manas recitals are broadcasted on radio and TV, Manaschīs recite on festivals and commemoration feasts, and when a Manaschī is present at a *toi* (party), he or she may be asked to recite spontaneously. Scholars and journalists, both Kyrgyzstani and foreign, form another important audience for Manaschīs.

Artists working with other art forms have also taken an interest in the Manas epic. Painters have used the story as a source of inspiration. The most famous of them is Theodor Herzen<sup>4</sup>, who illustrated the Manas version of Sagımbai Orozbekov published between 1978-1981. Two operas based on the Manas epic were created in the 1930s and are still regularly performed in Bishkek today. Various writers have written about Manas, among whom Semjon Lipkin who wrote a teenagers' book called 'Manas the Great-hearted' (*Manas Velikodushnyi*) in 1947 and A. Jakıpbekov whose novel 'Manas' was published in 1992.

There is also a group of scholars who have taken an interest in the Manas. The Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences has a Manas Department that originates from 1924 (Manas Entsiklopediası I:420). The Department has worked on collecting Manas recitals, on tape or in writing, and on the publication and translation into Russian of a number of versions. Manas scholars have also looked at the historical, ethnographic, philosophical and linguistic data that can be found in the Manas epic. They have studied the history of the epic and of Manaschīs. In 1995, the Academy established the National Center of Manasology and Fine Arts, on the initiative of president Akayev (website of Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences<sup>5</sup>). The Academy of Sciences has had tremendous financial difficulties since the collapse of the Soviet Union, but non-governmental funding, mostly from foreign organisations such as the Soros Foundation, does allow for some research.

Outside of Kyrgyzstan, there has also been scholarly interest in the Manas epic. This began in the late nineteenth century, when Wilhelm Radloff and Chokan Valikhanov

---

<sup>4</sup> Herzen's name is also transcribed as Gerzen. Neither Russian nor Kyrgyz have the H in speech nor alphabet, and the H is usually transcribed with a G. However, Herzen is probably the original name of his German ancestors.

<sup>5</sup> <http://academ.aknet.kg/institutes/manasology.html>, last visited 01-04-2006

collected Manas poems as part of their broader exploration projects. Scholars from other Soviet republics such as Viktor Zhirmunskyi (professor of literature at Leningrad, Moscow and Tashkent universities) and Mukhtar Auezov (member of Kazak SSR Academy of Sciences) included the Manas in their studies of Eastern literature and folklore. The Institute of World Literature in Moscow included the Manas in their series 'Epics of the Peoples of the USSR', that provided epic texts in the original language complemented with a Russian word for word translation.

Outside the Soviet Union, where scholars faced the impossibility to gather recent information about the Manas epic, a mere handful of linguists meticulously studied the versions that had been recorded by Radloff and Valikhanov in the late nineteenth century. Arthur Hatto and Nora Chadwick are the best-known scholars in this field (Hatto, 1977, 1979, 1990, Chadwick, 1969). Cecil Maurice Bowra used a Russian translation of Sagimbai Orozbekov's Manas version in his standard work on heroic poetry (Bowra, 1952). Since independence, the country is open for researchers from all over the world. Although the Manas epic has received a fair share of attention in international media, there are still very few foreign scholars who study the epic. Daniel Prior is a researcher of the first hour. He has discovered documents and sound recordings in obscure archives and conducted a unique form of field research by travelling through the mountains on horseback, with the itinerary of a nineteenth-century recording of the Manas as his map (Prior, 1998). In the USA, Germany and the UK one can find a number of young Kyrgyzstani scholars who work on dissertations about the Manas. Elmira Köchümulkizi has worked on a translation to English of the version of Sayakbai Karalaev. Turkish scholars have had a special interest in the Manas epic since the 1930s as part of the study of Turkic epic tales (*destan*). In a document now lost on the internet, Alpaslan Demir provides an impressive bibliography of over 250 books and articles that have been published in Turkish on the subject of the Manas. This list includes works of Kyrgyz Manas scholars and authors such as Hatto and Zhirmunsky that were translated into Turkish. Unfortunately, my lack of knowledge of the Turkish language has kept this body of literature closed to me.

Yet another group of social actors is interested in the Manas epic: politicians. Shortly after independence, president Akayev announced that the Manas epic was a symbol of 'the unity and spiritual revival of the Kyrgyz nation' (Asankanov and Ömürbekov, 1995). A book was published that explained the Seven Principles of the Manas as perceived by Akayev. By expressing his respect for the Manas, Akayev showed a



good patriotic face to Kyrgyzstan's population. A declaration to celebrate the 1,000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the epic symbolised true independence from the Soviet Union, when requests for an anniversary had been rejected three times by the authorities. However, a part of Kyrgyzstan's population was unhappy with this glorification of the Manas epic. Non-Kyrgyz ethnic group members could not identify with this folkloric symbol, because during Soviet times, the Manas had become firmly associated with the Kyrgyz. The combination of new language measures, the loss of a centre outside Kyrgyzstan to turn to for support and a perceived increased nepotism turned Kyrgyz nationalistic symbolism into a threat. This was an unwanted side-effect for president Akayev, whose policy was aimed at not offending or frightening the non-Kyrgyz population. When the Soviet Union fell apart, over 25% of Kyrgyzstan's population consisted of Slavs, who were often in key positions in economic and administrative functions. Almost 15% of the population were Uzbeks, and ethnic tensions between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks had led to violence in 1990. Akayev expressed his pacifying attitude in the slogan 'Kyrgyzstan – our Common Home' (*Kirgizstan – Nash Obshy Dom* (R), *Kirgizstan – Jalpi Üyüböz* (K)). In the symbolic use of the Manas epic, then, Akayev was careful to point at the international character of the story and of Manas' friendship with people from other ethnicities.

Other political players, such as the United Nations, took an interest in the Manas epic. UNESCO funded a large part of the eight million US dollars that were spent on the Manas 1,000 festival of 1995<sup>6</sup>. For the UN too, it was important to state that the Manas is not only an important expression of Kyrgyz traditions, but also 'a vitally important connecting link that supports and unites the peoples of the Middle Asia region' (Asankanov and Ömürbekov, 1995). Turkey had a special interest in the Manas epic, as it fitted in with the idea of a linguistic and cultural unity between Turkey and the Turkic republics of the former Soviet Union. The epic was translated into Turkish and the Turkish-Kyrgyz University that was established in Bishkek was named after Manas.

The Manas epic is thus performed and used in many different social situations. For the purpose of this dissertation, I will line out 'the context' of the Manas epic by zooming in on three kinds of expression of the epic: the oral performance, the publication of recorded versions and political rhetoric based on the epic. These expression forms are employed by a variety of actors who operate in one or more of these contexts. Manaschiis, for instance, recite the epic in oral performances, but they may also be engaged in the

---

<sup>6</sup> J. Wilson, Manas: the Kyrgyz Odysseys, Moses and Washington at <http://www.sras.org/news2.phtml?m=483>, last visited March 1, 2008.

publication of their version, and they may play a role in the political positioning of the Manas epic. Politicians may refer to the Manas when they convey their points of view, and be patrons for the publication of a written version, or stage a Manas performance at a festival. A schoolgirl may perform a Manas poem she has learnt by heart from a book during a lesson on the political meaning of the Manas epic.

A second aspect of ‘the context’ of the Manas epic is formed by time. Different periods in history brought different interests, interpretations and interactions. In this study, I use a periodisation of three different times: the period before, during and after the Soviet Union. The vast impact of the policies and structure of the Soviet Union on the lives of those involved with the Manas epic justifies this periodisation. Soviet reign forced an entirely new life style on the transhumance shepherds and horse breeders by settling them down and collectivising their herds, it brought organised schooling and literacy for all, introduced a series of new art forms and entertainment, and it advanced an ideology that greatly influenced concepts of ethnicity, Kyrgyz national consciousness and the role of folklore in these processes. It is important to realise, however, that these three periods are not separated by clear lines. One should not think that 1917 was the beginning of a period that was alien to the Kyrgyz and that separated them entirely from their past and future, only to land them back to their origins in 1991. Many processes that had their highlights in the Soviet period had started long before 1917, and the same goes for the processes that led to independence in 1991. Behaviour, world views and interactions did not change overnight, neither in 1917 nor in 1991. People brought their habits and opinions from one period into the other, and although each period brought new elements to the scene, they merged with the old.

### **I.3 Structure of this Study**

In the above paragraph I have defined two sets of definers, each consisting of three subdivisions which make up the context of the Manas epic. First, I have highlighted three expression forms – oral performance, publications and political rhetoric based on the Manas epic. Second, I have marked out three historical periods – the times before, during and after the Soviet Union. These sets of markers form the structure of this study: the expression forms are the core of three separate chapters that are each divided into three historical periods.

I will start this study with an introductory chapter. Kyrgyzstan is so little known that a basic introduction into the geography, history, economy and political situation of the

country is called for. Chapter one also provides background information on the methodology and social context of this research. A third component of chapter one is formed by the story-line of the Manas epic. This section is based on the plot of the tale told by Manaschī Sagimbai Orozbekov.

In chapter two I will explore the oral performance of the epic. In this chapter, I describe the art of performing the Manas, processes of learning and inspiration, the social position of Manaschīs, and the freedom and obligation to create one's own version of the epic. These aspects of the oral performance are placed in an historic perspective. The chapter concludes with reflections on the often-uttered idea that the oral performance of the Manas epic is dying out.

In chapter three I will delve into the publication of written versions of the Manas epic. This includes the history of the collection, writing down, publishing and translation of orally performed versions of the Manas, and of Manas performances that were conceived as written expressions. I will also include theatrical forms of Manas performance, and will discuss how the Manas epic is and has been studied by academics. Of specific interest is that the creation of written versions was closely connected to political considerations, and in a written form, the Manas epic became more susceptible to political machination.

In chapter four I will explain how the Manas epic is and has been used in political discourse. The historical periodisation will bring to light a number of assumptions on ethnicity and statehood of politicians and non-politicians that have shaped the political significance of the Manas epic over time. These assumptions have been vital to the success and failure of the Manas epic as a political emblem.

The final chapter, chapter five, looks back on the material presented in the previous chapters. Here, I will explain that 'the' Manas epic does not exist. Rather, 'the Manas epic' is a term that refers to a repository of tales, practices, usages and meanings. The underlying notions of this umbrella term are made up by differences in form, content, time period, purpose of engagement, social position of the actors involved and the meanings ascribed to the Manas. In a re-examination of the material presented in the previous chapters through the lens of the above-mentioned variables, the multifaceted nature of the Manas epic becomes apparent.

# Chapter One    Kyrgyzstan: Remarkably Unknown

## 1.1    Kyrgyzstan introduced

Kyrgyzstan is a remarkably unknown country to most world citizens. Since its conception in the 1920s, outside observers have usually treated it as a backwater of the impenetrable Soviet Union. There was little interest and even less opportunity to gather information on this particular Soviet republic. But even within the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan was relatively unknown. It is as likely to meet a person from Russia or the Ukraine who has never heard of Kyrgyzstan as someone from the Netherlands or the USA. As one of my informants who has a Kyrgyz father and a Russian mother said:

I was raised in Kazan in Russia and went to school when the Soviet Union still existed. The kids in school did not understand that I was Kyrgyz. I sometimes explained, but they still thought I was Tatar, or from the Caucasus. We were taught some facts and figures about Kyrgyzstan in school, but that was it.

Kyrgyzstan briefly became world news in March 2005, when it was the third in a row of velvet revolutions among former Soviet Union countries. President Akayev, who had been the president since 1990 (one year before Kyrgyzstan's independence) was ousted, to be replaced by opposition leaders who had until recently taken part in Akayev's government. A few years before that, Kyrgyzstan had become a focus of interest in the War on Terrorism, because of its majority Muslim population and its vicinity to Afghanistan. The country opened its main airport *Manas* for the Coalition Forces, who all stationed troops there.

The lack of a solid general base of background information gives the study of Kyrgyzstan a special dimension. Researchers and audience do not share images of the country that are based on a large number of impressions from different sources. Thus, every morsel of new information becomes disproportionately important in the creation of new images, and may be taken out of perspective. It also means that the researcher does not have an extensive body of knowledge to fall back on. Questions that are raised can often not be answered, as there is no corpus of data and general consensus. This can give

the researcher a sense of walking on quick sand, but it also keeps the researcher, and hopefully her audience as well, focused and unable to take anything for granted.

In this chapter, I will give an overview of images of Kyrgyzstan as it is portrayed in journalist reports, travel guides, and works of social scientists. This will provide the reader unfamiliar with Kyrgyzstan with a framework of background information that cannot be presupposed.

#### 1.1.1 Kyrgyzstan Located

Kyrgyzstan, a country of 198,500 square km, is about the size of Great Britain. Its population of 5 million is considerably less than that of the UK, however, because of the mountains that cover the larger part of the country. Kyrgyzstan's impressive mountain ranges, known as the Tien Shan, Ala Too and Alay ranges, are extensions of the Himalayas. Ninety per cent of Kyrgyzstan's territory is above 1,500 metres and forty-one per cent is above 3,000 metres. Perpetual snow covers about a third of the country's surface. Large amounts of water, in the form of mountain lakes and wild rivers, are a consequence of this landscape.

Kyrgyzstan is landlocked and bordered by four countries, three of which are former Soviet Union republics. Kazakhstan lies to the North, Uzbekistan to the West and Tajikistan to the South. The Eastern border is shared with China, or more precisely: with the Chinese province Xinjiang, home of many Turkic and Muslim peoples. Administratively, Kyrgyzstan is divided into seven provinces (*oblus*, from Russian *oblast*) and two cities (*shaar*). The two cities are Osh city and the country's capital Bishkek. Bishkek was known as Frunze during Soviet times, named after Red Army hero Mikhael Frunze<sup>7</sup>. In 1991, four months before independence, the city was renamed Bishkek (Prior, 1994:42).

Kyrgyzstan is commonly divided in the North and South. The South consist of three provinces: Jalal-Abad, Osh and Batken. Batken was separated from Osh after the invasion of Islamic guerrillas in August 1999<sup>8</sup>. The North consists of the Chüy, Talas, İssikköl and Narin provinces. Looking at the map, it is clear that 'North' and 'South' are not so much

---

<sup>7</sup> Frunze was of Moldovian descent. He was born in Bishkek, that was then called Pishpek, a small town that had grown around a Khokand fortress (Prior, 1994:13, 92). He played an important role in Turkestan and the Crimea during the Civil War that followed the October Revolution.

<sup>8</sup> The invaders came across the border from Tajikistan and were said to be members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, wishing to overthrow Uzbekistan's president Karimov and found an Islamic state in the Ferghana valley (Megoran, 2001:50). The guerillas took sixteen hostages, among whom four Japanese geologists. Uzbekistan sent bomber jets and bombed the wrong village, killing five people.

geographical indications, as İssikköl and Narın are at the same latitude as Jalal-Abad. A mountain ridge with very few passages, however, separates the North from the South, making them far apart in people's experience. If one travels from Osh to Narın, for instance, one usually takes a triangle route through Bishkek. There is a road that traverses the mountain ridge that separates them, but snow often renders it impassable. Until 1962, there was not even a road between Osh and Bishkek (then: Frunze), the railway that connected the two cities ran by way of Tashkent.

The term 'Kyrgyzstan' is a choice out of a number of names for the country. Presently, the official name in the Kyrgyz language is *Kirgiz Respublikası*. In English, it is 'the Kyrgyz Republic', after the 'h' in Kyrgyz was dropped in 1999. One year before independence, shortly after Akayev's appointment as president, the Republic of Kyrgyzstan became the official name for the republic after it announced its sovereignty (Rashid, 1994:147). In May 1993, this was changed to the Kyrgyz Republic. Another often-heard name for the country is Kirgizia, which is based on Russian, who substituted the *ı* (usually transliterated as *y*) by an *i* to fit Russian grammatical rules<sup>9</sup>. Popular in the country itself is the word 'Kyrgyzstan'. This term is not new, but was already in use in the early days of the Soviet Union. In this dissertation, I will join with popular habit and refer to the country as Kyrgyzstan.

### 1.1.2 History of Kyrgyzstan

The actual history of Kyrgyzstan begins in 1924, when the territory was first plotted to a map<sup>10</sup>. Within the larger framework of the Soviet Union, the Kyrgyz Autonomous Region was drawn up as a separate political and administrative unit. By 1936, this unit had become a sovereign Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), one of the eleven (later: fifteen) SSRs that made up the Soviet Union (Rashid, 1994:143). Of course, this delineation was not contrived in a historical vacuum but was built upon existing ideas of a certain population living in a certain area. However, the demarcation of the Soviet republics was based on choices that took certain ideas into account and left others out. A historical account of Kyrgyzstan that pre-dates 1924, then, easily falls prey to teleological reasoning. Taking Kyrgyzstan as a unit for historic research about times when the idea of 'Kyrgyzstan' did

---

<sup>9</sup> The difference between *Kirgiz* and *Kirgiz* has become highly politicised since perestroika and independence. It became politically correct to say *Kirgiz*. Russified Kyrgyz are contemptuously referred to as Kirgiz, i.e. not real Kyrgyz. Kirsten Verpaalen has pointed out the obscene connotation of this word: in Kyrgyz, the verb '*kirgiz*' means 'to bring in, to insert' (personal communication).

<sup>10</sup> With the exception of a number of border disputes with other (former) Soviet republics and China that over the years led to adjustments of the boundaries, see Megoran, 2001.

not exist means placing a contemporary concept which is meaningless at the time of study, as the focal point. One may begin to look for the word 'Kyrgyz' in historical documents and project the findings onto the group of people who are presently called Kyrgyz and who live in a Kyrgyz nation-state. Or alternatively, it is possible to project the boundaries of the territory back into the past and see coherences and connections that would not have made sense at the time. This is exactly what has happened in Soviet and post-Soviet historiography, as a part of conscious or unconscious 'community imagining' (Anderson, 1986). It led to a division of history into two tiers: the history of the Kyrgyz ethnic group and the history of the territory. The two do not come together until the sixteenth century, when the Kyrgyz are believed to have moved to the Tien Shan Mountains where they live today.

In a similar way, historians have projected the concept of the contemporary State back into the past. They have attempted to describe Central Asia's history as a succession of nation-states or their equivalents. The aspiration to bring order to thousands of years of human interaction has time and again led authors to look for names of ethnic groups who formed a political unity that arose, defeated another unit and was replaced in time by yet another unit. The situation in present-day Central Asia, Siberia, China and Mongolia, however, is far more complex than that. Political units changed constantly, they covered different territories at different times, merged with other groups at one time and fought them at another time. Various ethnic groups could be part of a certain political unit or ethnic groups themselves could deal with temporarily important divisions. Furthermore, it is by no means clear how individuals perceived their ethnic, linguistic, religious and political identities. Nomadic groups especially would organise their political structures quite differently from present-day nation-states. The attempts of different authors to compile a chronology of ethnic states, then, inevitably led to differing and often conflicting time lines. Another confusing factor is the fact that political and ethnic groups were known under numerous and varied names, and in turn other names were shared by a number of different groups. L. Krader speaks of '*a pool or reservoir of ethnic identifications, or ethnonyms, upon which peoples could draw*' (Krader, 1963:81). Although this observation makes the use of ethnonyms seem random and arbitrary, it is indeed striking how ethnonyms continue to appear in differing contexts. The reasons that people had for using certain ethnonyms at certain times remain obscure.

The process of producing a historiography for Kyrgyzstan is further hampered by the fact that data on both the history of Kyrgyzstan's territory and the history of the Kyrgyz

people is scarce. A number of externally written sources (mostly Chinese, Persian and Arabic) have been discovered, in addition to some internal Turkic runic inscriptions and numerous archeological excavations. The lack of a firm historical framework for the analysis of these data leads to varying and differing interpretations. As most historians focus on providing a neat, complete and readable narrative, they omit confusing and conflicting data. However, when one attempts to align the pieces together in a neat and concise manner, the confusions reappear.

In this introduction, I will not burden the reader with the perhaps frustrating chore of struggling through masses of foreign names belonging to ethnic groups with obscure status and abstruse interconnections. Instead, I will specify a number of historic patterns and mention those anecdotes that have become symbolic markers of entire historical periods for my informants. I will follow the method of periodisation which forms an obvious thread in this book: the periods before, during and after the Soviet Union.

#### 1.1.2.1 Before the Soviet Union

It is within this period that a distinction between the history of the Kyrgyz and the history of Kyrgyzstan should be made. I will begin with the latter, as it is traced back further in time than the former.

#### History of the territory of Kyrgyzstan

Historians who concentrate on the history of Kyrgyzstan's territory regress as far back as the Paleolithicum by identifying archaeological findings of stone artefacts and rock paintings in the Tien Shan, Issykköl and Ferghana areas. These have been dated to the Palaeolithic period of 800 thousand – 10 thousand years BC (Mokrynin and Ploskich, 1995:5). The first people to have been identified by name are the Sakas, also known as Scythians. The Sakas are said to have arrived in the area in the sixth century BC (ibid.:14). They were a nomadic people who inhabited various places in a vast area from South Siberia to the Black Sea. They have been identified as being speakers of an Iranian language. According to Mokrynin and Ploskich, the North and South of Kyrgyzstan were inhabited by two different Sakas tribes (ibid.).

Three elements of this depiction of the Sakas recur in descriptions of the history of Central Asia and Siberia: they are either nomads or settled peoples, they are Turkic or Persian/Iranian, and they inhabit Kyrgyzstan's North or South. First of all, the inhabiting groups are characterised as nomadic or settled peoples. This feature is often singled out as



the driving force behind the interaction dynamics in the area. Historians discern a pattern of a continuous struggle between nomads and settlers. Nomadic groups are seen to form federations with the aim of conquering and subjugating settler groups. These nomadic federations advance over large stretches of land, looting and destroying towns and cities, until the nomads settle down themselves, form settled civilisations that are destroyed by new nomadic federations in their turn. This meta-analysis has given rise to stereotypical images of nomadic peoples that are violent and freedom-loving versus settled groups that are industrious, religious and sustain high culture. When put to the test of the data on present-day Kyrgyzstan, however, the pattern fails. Nomadic groups often forced each other out of their territories, living peacefully alongside settler groups at the same time. Generally, the Tien Shan mountains are seen as cradles of nomadic groups, whereas the Ferghana valley gave rise to a number of urban civilisations. In 130 BC, for example, a Chinese diplomat who travelled Central Asia found a settled group, the Davan, in the Ferghana valley and a nomadic state of Wu-sun in the mountains (ibid.:34, 44). These groups are both remembered in Kyrgyzstan by compelling anecdotes. The Davan were the owners of the legendary ‘Heavenly Horses’. The Chinese were keen on obtaining these to use them in their battles against the Xiong-nu (probably the Huns). They sent two armies to fight the Davan, in 103 and 101 BC, and only obtained the desired horses when they defeated the Davan in the second campaign (ibid.:46). Of the Wu-sun, a seventh-century Chinese writer wrote the following:

the Wu-sun differ greatly in their appearance from other foreigners of the Western lands. To-day the Turks with blue eyes and red beards, resembling apes, are their descendants (Barthold, 1956:76).

During my fieldwork, I found that this comment had been modified into my informants’ frequent assertion that ‘the Kyrgyz used to look like Europeans, with red hair and blue eyes’. Interesting is the difference in assessment of the physical features – ape-like to the Chinese, which was probably a low-status qualification, and European-like to present-day Kyrgyz, that they generally regard as a high-status qualification. Also interesting is that in this case, my Kyrgyz informants traced their ancestry back to the early inhabitants of present-day Kyrgyzstan. Commonly, the ancestor Kyrgyz are considered to be a people that migrated from Siberia. It is possible, of course, that in popular historiography the comment on the Wu-sun is taken entirely out of context and transferred to the Siberian ancestors.

In later years, the area was inhabited by members of the nomadic federation of the Juan Juan (ibid.:81), and other nomadic empires such as the K  k-T  rk (Kwanten, 1979:39), the Karluks (ibid.:59) and the khanate of Chingiz-Khan's son Chagatai (ibid.:249). The urban-based Karakhanid state was the first Islamic state in present-day Kyrgyzstan. In the tenth century it had power centres in Talas and Kashkar, and later also in present-day Uzbekistan's cities of Samarkhand and Buchara (ibid.:61).

However, not all empires that held power over the area can easily be defined as nomadic or settled. A second distinction has therefore been brought forward. The early inhabitants of Kyrgyzstan's territory are also identified as Iranian, Turkic or otherwise, usually by a reference to their language. As I have mentioned, the early Sakas were said to have spoken an Iranian language. The first Turks appeared on the scene in the sixth century AD. They are referred to as the K  k-T  rk (Blue or Celestial Turks). Their khaganate gained momentum in 552, when the last Juan Juan khan was defeated (Mokrynin and Ploskich, 1995:58). Present-day Kyrgyzstan fell under the Western khanate when it split in 581 (ibid., Barthold, 1956:82). The K  k-T  rk are remembered by my informants because of their so-called Orkhon Inscriptions. In 1889, a Russian expedition to Mongolia uncovered two monuments to Bilge Khan and his brother K  l Tigin in the valley of the river Orkhon. These monuments were adorned with runic inscriptions that are important to the present-day Kyrgyz because they mention a Kyrgyz people at the Yenisey River. At the Yenisey River itself, similar runic inscriptions have been found.

Other Turkic states have been formed by the Seljuk, a branch of the Oguz Turks (Kwanten, 1979:65) and the empire ruled by Timur, also known as Timur-i-leng or Tamerlane (ibid.:266). However, most of the empires that extended their influence over present-day Kyrgyzstan cannot be identified by one clear ethnic background. The Kara-Kitai, for example, are described by Kwanten as the refugee descendants of another empire, the Ch'i-tan empire (ibid.). He explains that scholars still debate whether they were Tungusic, Mongol or Turkic (ibid.:71). In many versions of the Manas epic, the Kara-Kitai are mentioned as Manas' main enemies (Manas Enstiklopediasy I:276). According to B. M. Yunusaliev, the Kara-Kitai are also known as Kidan in the epic (ibid.), which appears to be the same word as Ch'i-tan. Nowadays, the word Kitai is used for China and the Chinese, but considering the above, care should be taken in identifying Manas' Kara-Kitai enemies as a group of ethnic Chinese (ibid., see also chapter four). The Kara-Kitai were ousted by the Nayman, another name that occurs in Manas versions, and whose ethnic affiliation is obscure. They were on the run from Mongols, but later referred to as Mongols

themselves (Barthold, 1956:106-110). The subsequent Chagatai khanate is described as a loose coalition of Türks, Uighurs, Kara-Kitais, Persians and others under the leadership of a tiny Mongol minority (Kwanten, 1979:250). After Chagatai's death, the khanate became politically unstable and was ruled by eighteen subsequent khans, until its division in 1338 into Transoxiana and Mogholistan (ibid.:250-251). Most of present-day Kyrgyzstan fell under Mogholistan, Moghol being the word used by the Mongols to denote Turkic peoples (Mokrynin and Ploskich, 1995:135). The previously mentioned Timur, who was born in a Turkic family, came next. When he died, present-day Kyrgyzstan went back to being Mogholistan and was ruled by Mongol leaders who had to deal with Turkic coup attempts (Barthold:146-158). All of this clearly indicates that the population was not reducible to one single ethnic group.

The third recurring element in the description of Kyrgyzstan's history is the division between North and South. This division, that is so important today, is recovered in past epochs. The situation of the urban Davan in the South versus the nomadic Wu-sun in the North is paralleled in the eighteenth and nineteenth century by the Southern Kyrgyz who were part of the Khanate of Kokhand and the Northern Kyrgyz who fell outside of Khokand and were either independent, or under Russian and Chinese rule.

In the sixteenth century, the occupation of this area was taken up by the Kazakh and the Kyrgyz (ibid.:158). This is where the two story-lines – the history of the territory of Kyrgyzstan and the history of the Kyrgyz people – collide. Before returning to this point, I will summarise the historiography of the Kyrgyz ethnic group.

### History of the Kyrgyz

The Kyrgyz are traced back to the third century BC, when Chinese annals speak of a people called the *Hehun*. Kyrgyzstani scholars argue that these must be the Kyrgyz, because they are also referred to as *Hyan-hun*, *Kigu* or *Chigu* (Mokrynin and Ploskich, 1995:29). These people lived in Southern Siberia, along the River Yenisey (ibid.) or one of its sources in the Altai mountains (Krader, 1962:59), over 1,000 km north-east of present-day Kyrgyzstan. According to Barthold, the Hehun people were not originally Turkic but Samoyedic (ibid.), just like the Uralic peoples who live along the Yenisey River today. Around the sixth to eighth centuries AD, Greek, Chinese, Arab and Uygur sources mention a Kyrgyz state halfway along the Yenisey River (Mokrynin and Ploskich, 1995:68).

According to Mokrynin and Ploskich, the names used in these sources closely resemble the word Kyrgyz. Greek sources speak of *Kherkis* and *Khirkhiz*, Arab sources of

*Khyrgyz* or *Khyrkhyz*, Chinese *Syatszyasy* or *Tszilitsisy*, and Uygur and Sogdi texts speak of *Kyrgyz* (ibid.). However, most of the available information about this group comes from a number of Chinese sources, which use names that can be transliterated in various ways. Liu speaks of *Ki-ku*, *Chien-k'un* or *Hsia-ch'a-ssu* (Liu, 1958:175), Wittfogel and Chia-Shêng add *Ko-k'un*, *Chieh-ku*, *Ho-ku* and *Hoku-ssü* (Wittfogel and Chia-Shêng, 1949:50). They remark that according to Barthold, these terms are a crude transcriptions by the Chinese of the original word best transcribed as *ki-li-ki-si* (ibid.). The variety of ethnonyms indicates that the contribution of specific information to the ancestors of the present-day *Kyrgyz* is problematic, to say the least. Furthermore, there is no conclusive evidence that the people who are called *Kyrgyz* today are descendants from these 'Kyrgyz' in Siberia. Still, present-day *Kyrgyz* feel related to these 'Kyrgyz', and base their history on secondary information from the Chinese sources. In this interpretation, the *Kyrgyz* were the people who fought a fierce battle with the Uygurs in 840 AD. The *Kyrgyz* won and destroyed the Uygur capital Karabalghasun (Barfield, 1989:152-160). They were not interested in trade, and after having turned Orkhon into a backwater they were driven away from it by the Khitans fifty years later (ibid.:165).

In Suji in present-day Mongolia, a text has been found that was written in 'Kyrgyz letters' (Mokrynin and Ploskich, 1995:93), a rhunic script similar to the above-mentioned Orkhon Inscriptions. It is dated to the ninth or tenth century and contains eleven verses, the first of which are translated as: 'I have come from Uygur ground, called Yaklagar-Khan<sup>11</sup>. I am a son of the *Kyrgyz*.' (ibid.).

The *Kyrgyz* are mentioned again in connection to the conquest of a Karluk town in 982. Barthold writes:

At that time the *Qirgiz* lived in the upper basin of the Yenisey, where, according to Chinese sources, they were visited every three years by Arab caravans carrying silk from Kucha. [...] It is possible that the *Qirghiz*, having allied themselves with the *Qarluk*, took the field against the *Toquz-Oghuz* and occupied that part of *Semirechyé* which is their present home. In any case, the bulk of the *Qirghiz* migrated into the *Semirechyé* considerably later. Had they lived in the *Semirechyé* at the time of the *Qarakhanids*, they would have been converted to Islam in the

---

<sup>11</sup> Although *Yaklagar-khan* (or: *Yaglakar-khan*) seems to be the name of the Uygur ground rather than the *Kyrgyz* person, A. Bernshtam used this text to build his hypothesis that *Yaklagar-khan* was the 'prototype' for the hero *Manas*.

tenth or eleventh century. As it is, they were still looked upon as heathen in the sixteenth century (Barthold, 1956:91-92).

In a later work, Barthold cites a manuscript from the tenth century in which the Kyrgyz are located near Kashkar, where they live now. He adds, however, that most of the extant sources, such as the Mahmud al-Kasghari, do not mention them (Barthold, 1962:76). Barthold maintains that at the time of the Kara-Kita Empire (which in the twelfth century reached from the Yenisey to Talas), the Kyrgyz still lived near the Yenisey River (Barthold, 1956:92). The Kyrgyz were heavily embroiled in the continual warfare that went on until the sixteenth century (ibid.:152-158).

### The Kyrgyz in Kyrgyzstan

During the second half of the fifteenth century, the Kyrgyz moved to the Tien Shan area (Mokrynin and Ploskich, 1995:144-149). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Kyrgyz fought heavy battles against the Kalmaks of Jungaria (also known as Kalmaks, Kalmiks or Oyrats) (ibid.:161-3). These struggles are often seen as the inspiration for the battles in the Manas epic.

In 1757, the Jungarian empire was defeated by the Chinese (ibid.:167). The Kyrgyz now entered into a political relationship with China and had ambassadors in Beijing (ibid.:169). In the 1760s, the Southern Kyrgyz came under the control of the khanate of Kokhand (ibid.:192), one of the three city states (Bukhara, Khiva and Kokhand) that ruled Central Asia. However, the Kyrgyz tribes<sup>12</sup> in the North were not conquered before the 1820s, and even then they remained in opposition to the khanate (Prior, 1994:14). In the 1860s, a number of Northern tribes accepted aid from the Russians in their revolts against Kokhand, and managed to break free from it permanently in 1862 (ibid.). According to Prior, 'the locals went back to nomadizing and farming, and the Russian army continued to pound Kokand' (ibid.:16).

In spite of this, the Northern tribes were not all at peace, as the Bugu and Saribagish were at war with one another. In 1854, a fierce battle between the tribes had led to the defeat of the Bugu, even though the *manap* Urman of the Saribagish had been killed (Semenov, 1998:73). The Bugu left the shores of Lake Issikköl and went to the Santash region to the East. Here, they became subject to Chinese rule (ibid.).

---

<sup>12</sup> The word 'tribe' is generally used to translate the Kyrgyz word *uruu*. At present, the term *uruu* denotes a patrilineal subdivision of the Kyrgyz ethnic group. The social and political status of the *uruu* in pre-Soviet days remains obscure.

The Southern Kyrgyz tribes remained linked to Kokhand until the end of the khanate. They fought the Tsarist armies and only fell into Russian hands when Kokhand surrendered in 1876 (Temirkulov, 2004, Prior, 1994:16). A famous name from this era is Kurmanjan-datka, vassal to Kokhand and leader of the Southern Kyrgyz since 1862. She was the widow of the murdered Alimbek-datka, and is said to have commanded an army of 10,000 soldiers (*jigit*). When Kokhand fell, Kurmanjan-datka urged her people to give up their resistance to Russia, and she established good relations with Russian representatives. She retired from public life when her favourite son was executed under accusation of contraband and murdering custom officials. Her role of either heroine or traitor is debated until this day. Nevertheless, her picture adorns the 50 som banknote of independent Kyrgyzstan.

Under the Russian Tsarist administration, present-day Kyrgyzstan fell under various administrative units. The biggest part of the area fell under the Semirechye Province, which was part of the Steppe Governorate from 1882 until 1899, when it became part of the Turkistan Governorate (Murray Matly, 1989:93). From 1891 onwards, waves of Russian colonists came to the Steppe Governorate to settle. After the abolition of serfdom in Russia, landless peasants were attracted by the so-called Virgin Lands of present-day Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In 1916, revolts of the Muslim population against the Russians broke out all over Central Asia (Carrère d'Encausse, 1989:210-211). The direct cause was a decree that mobilised the Central Asians into workers' battalions to replace Russian workers who fought in the first world war. Relations with Russian settlers had been tense, especially amongst the Kyrgyz of Semirechye, and as a result the revolt was fierce (*ibid.*). In Semirechye, 2,000 Russian settlers were killed, but far more locals perished. One third of the Kyrgyz population fled to China (*ibid.*).

#### 1.1.2.2 The Soviet Union

The Socialist Revolution of 1917 was largely a Russian concern in Semirechye. According to Daniel Prior, the general Kyrgyz population did not take active part in the revolution (Prior, 1994:29). A number of educated young men took the opportunity to make a political career within the new communist structure, which sustained an active policy of indigenisation, or as Terry Martin terms it: affirmative action (Martin, 2001). By the end of the 1930s, all of them had perished in the purges. In the years of civil war (1917-1920), famine ruled daily life in Central Asia (Brill Ollcot, 1987:149-152). After the civil war,

once Soviet rule was firmly established, the construction of a socialist society began.

Martha Brill Olcott speaks of the Kazakhs when she writes:

those who could afford it migrated part of the year and stalled their animals in winter, while those who could not support themselves solely through livestock breeding practiced subsistence farming as well. [...] Clan, village, and aul authorities simply reconstituted themselves as soviets (ibid.:162).

During the years of the New Economic Policy, the economy gradually recovered.

However, in 1929, a programme of collectivisation was initiated which caused another horrendous famine. People preferred to slaughter their animals rather than see them becoming communal property, even though each household was allowed to keep a few animals (ibid.:176-187). This did not prevent collectivisation to be implemented and becoming the basis for the economy for the following sixty years.

Another restructuring process of the first Soviet years is known as the national demarcation. The former Tsarist empire was radically reorganised on the basis of national autonomy. A number of ethnic groups were recognised as nations and were awarded republics or autonomous regions. The Kyrgyz were among them, and by 1936, the Kyrgyz SSR became one of eleven (later: fifteen) Soviet Socialist Republics (SSR). The status of SSR proved most important in 1991, when all fifteen SSR became independent states, in contrast to areas such as Chechnya, Dagestan and Tuva, which remained under Moscow's control as autonomous republics within the Russian Federation.

By the time collectivisation and national demarcation had been completed, the Purges began. In 1934, the first wave of purges swept over the Soviet Union. 'Bourgeois nationalism' was regarded as the evil that needed to be eradicated. The second wave in 1937 was even more lethal, and many Central Asian leaders were executed. The second world war, known as the Great Patriotic War in the USSR, left deep traces in Kyrgyzstan. Every village has a monument for the sons that fell in battles far away. By this time, the policy of indigenisation had shifted towards a Russian-oriented governance. Teresa Rakowska-Harmstone explains:

Local nationals were required to occupy the highest hierarchical positions and all posts of representative character. Invariably, however, a local leader was either seconded by a Russian or backed by a Russian or Russians close to him in the hierarchy. [...] The lower executives were almost always Russians, especially in the central Party and state agencies. While not in the public eye, they actually

formed the backbone of the republican bureaucracy (Rakowska-Harmstone, 1970:96).

The death of Stalin in 1953 was lamented all over the Soviet Union. The statues and pictures of Stalin remained in place until Krushchev's famous 'secret speech' of 1956, in which he denounced the personality cult surrounding Stalin and accused him of crimes committed during the purges. But even today, many people in Kyrgyzstan speak highly of Stalin, praising his strong leadership and recognition of national culture and downplaying the scare of the purges.

The stretch of time between the end of the second world war and the beginning of *perestroika* in Central Asia is often characterised as the period of stagnation (Prior, 1994:38-41). Most historic overviews brush over these forty years as if nothing much happened. Politically, the scene was dominated by conservative party secretaries who stayed put in their positions for decades. In the Kyrgyz SSR, Turdakun Usubaliev was First Secretary from 1961 until 1985. In the areas of industry, agriculture, education, health care, infrastructure and culture, however, massive achievements were accomplished. Contrary to the image of the Soviet Union as a hated, totalitarian regime, the people I met in Kyrgyzstan looked back upon the Soviet period as a prosperous and pleasant era. Although they did appreciate the openness of the new times, they were not particularly relieved that the Soviet Union was over. The people I encountered had found means to get by and function within the framework of state socialism.

In November 2007, a news report on Dutch television drew parallels between the present NATO presence in Afghanistan and the Soviet Afghan war of the 1980s. An interviewed Russian general concluded:

We should never have tried to implement socialism in Afghanistan. It never gained foothold, just as it failed in Mongolia and Uzbekistan and Kirgizia.

From my perspective, this seems a misinterpretation of the influence of socialism in Kyrgyzstan. In the life stories of my informants, socialism was deeply integrated into their social world. Their economic activities took place in socialist collectives, socialist world views were taught at schools and accepted by the pupils, children were active in organisations such as the *Komsomol* (Communist Youth Union), arts were celebrated in festivals with a socialist tinge, and so forth. The stereotypical image of a socialist state that forced itself upon the people, who kept their true convictions and expressions secret, also seems false in the light of what my informants told me. My host father in Kazıbek village, for instance, was a fervent Muslim and socialist at the same time, and he saw no



contradiction in that. I do not know if he would have expressed his adherence as vehemently during Soviet days; perhaps the demise of socialism had created room for a new assertion of his Muslim identity. However, he was so at ease with the combination of the two convictions that I deem it likely that this was not new for him. In a similar way, Manaschī Talantaalī Bakchiev had combined becoming a Manaschī with active socialist networking. He told me he had been an active and ambitious member of his local *Komsomol* department in his teenage years. These were also the years when he began to explore his Manaschīhood.

In 1987, as the *perestroika* and *glasnost* policies gave room for critical thought and discussions, a few debating clubs consisting mainly of young Russian-speaking intellectuals arose in Frunze (Babak, 2003). By 1989, these political clubs had ceased to exist, partly because of harassment by the authorities, and partly because their position was taken over by groups that united over certain issues, such as ecology or culture (ibid.). In this climate, a political action group called *Ashar* became popular because of its standpoint on housing issues. There was a growing shortage of housing in the capital, and when young Kyrgyz people started to move to the city they built illegal dwellings outside and inside the city centre (Rashid, 1994:146). A group of young Kyrgyz intellectuals formed *Ashar* (litt: mutual help, solidarity) and managed to obtain land from the city authorities for legal home building (ibid.).

A few months later, in June 1990, riots broke out in Osh oblast. These evolved into a week of extremely violent clashes between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the area between Osh city and Özgön. According to official numbers, 120 Uzbeks, 50 Kyrgyz and one Russian were killed and over 5,000 crimes such as rape, assault and pillage were committed (Tishkov 1995:134,135). As with any violent conflict, opinions on the culpability and the causes of the conflict vary enormously. In his study ‘Don’t kill me, I’m a Kyrgyz!’, Tishkov points to a wide range of factors that led individuals to commit their atrocities. Poor living and health conditions and rivalry over land between the ethnic groups were structural causes. At the heat of the moment, fury seemed to be fuelled by rumours of Uzbeks killing Kyrgyz, by strong individuals who stirred up the youth, the absence of authoritative peace keeping and by alcoholic intoxication. Tishkov names another element of the frenzy of that week, which is of specific interest for this study:

Young Kyrgyz on horseback were trying to demonstrate their strength and superiority by lifting up an opponent by his legs and smashing him down on the ground – exactly in the way the legendary Kyrgyz heroes supposedly overpowered

their enemies. ‘We have read about it a lot, but this is the first time it’s been possible to try it out for ourselves!’, they said (Tishkov, 1995:148).

The unrest of the housing and the Osh riots led to the dismissing of First Secretary Absamat Masaliyev. When none of three candidates managed to get a majority vote from the Kyrgyz SSR Supreme Soviet, Askar Akayev came into the picture, and after winning the vote he was installed as President. Akayev is often portrayed as the first non-Communist president of Central Asia. This is true to the extent that he was not on the top list of Communist leaders at the time of his election by the Kyrgyz SSR Supreme Soviet. His career was in mathematics and physics, and in 1989 he became the president of the Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences. However, Akayev did also have a political career within the Communist Party. In his 1999 biography *Askar Akaev, the First President of the Kyrgyz Republic*, his position of Head of the Department of Science and Higher Educational Institutions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in 1986 is boasted, as well as his election as Deputy of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR and his positions of member of the USSR Chamber of Nationalities and the Supreme Soviet Committee on Economic Reform in 1989 (Rud, 1999:21,23). Be that as it may, Akayev was an unexpected face at the head of the Kyrgyz SSR, and he brought with him an atmosphere of change and reform.

#### 1.1.2.3 After the Soviet Union

Less than a year after Akayev’s installation as president, conservative communists in Moscow staged a coup d’état against Gorbachov’s government. Akayev was the only Central Asian leader who immediately condemned the coup. A few days later, the fifteen republics of the Soviet Union had all declared their independence, and the Soviet Union ceased to exist. His early denouncement of the coup gave Akayev the aura of a brave, strong and democracy-loving leader in the eyes of western observers. This was important, as Akayev took the standpoint that Kyrgyzstan, with very few natural resources of its own, was dependent on the outside world for economic security. The Kyrgyz government put enormous effort into building up good international relations, looking in many directions. Western countries were charmed by his interest in economic reform and democracy. Japan was honoured by becoming the model for Kyrgyzstan’s road to development as was Switzerland, South Korea and Turkey. Turkey was especially enthusiastic as it looked forward to forging alliances with the new Turkic republics. Ties with Russia had loosened rapidly, but Akayev went at great lengths to keep good relations with Russia. Border

disputes with China originating in Soviet times were resolved as quickly as possible and trade opened up immediately. Canada provided a gold mining company that in a joint venture with the Kyrgyz state started the exploitation the Kumtor goldmine.

The biggest sums of money obtained from diplomacy were the loans by the IMF and the World Bank. The introduction of shock therapy led to quick reforms of the economy, but did indeed leave the population in a state of shock. Over time, the position and power of the president changed, both in relation to the parliament (*Jogorku Kengesh*, litt: Supreme Soviet) and the population. As Akayev heeded the parliament less and less, most of the population started to regard him as a corrupt leader who enriched himself and his family, and who had proved unable to secure a strong international position for Kyrgyzstan. The presidential elections of 2000 also made international organisations such as the OSCE critical of Akayev, and when at the 2005 parliamentary elections the attempts at manipulation cropped up again, Akayev had fallen out of grace by almost everyone. The elections were followed by protest marches. To the surprise of many, these led to a true velvet revolution, known as the Tulip Revolution. President Akayev was ousted and escaped to Moscow.

A new era started with Kurmanbek Bakiyev as president and Felix Kulov as prime minister. Bakiyev and Kulov started off as political rivals for the presidential elections. Their campaigns increased precarious tensions in the country, because Southerner Bakiyev and Northerner Kulov both capitalised on long-standing antagonism between the North and the South. The escalations came to a halt when the two opponents proclaimed their unexpected alliance: if Bakiyev was chosen as president, Kulov would be his prime minister. This is what happened, but the tensions between North and South did not diminish. In 2007, a Kyrgyz informant wrote to me in an email that ‘we have a big North-South problem at the moment, an invisible war is going on’.

The new government renewed ties with Russia, allowing Russia to intensify its influence in economic and military spheres. In October 2005, the murder of two parliamentarians, who were also well-known businessmen, gave much unrest within the government and led to a sense of disappointment with most of the population in their new leadership. People felt unsafe, and rumours about criminal infiltration of the government became louder. The Tulip revolution had turned into disillusionment very quickly. Bakiyev faced numerous street protests against him, mostly on the issue of the promised new constitution that would transfer some of the president’s powers to the parliament. In April 2007, Bakiyev finally signed amendments to the constitution that would diminish

presidential powers. Five months later, however, the new constitution was invalidated by the Constitutional Court of Kyrgyzstan. In response, Bakiyev called a referendum to be held in October, at which the new constitution was approved by over 75% of the votes. The referendum was heavily criticised by Kyrgyzstani and international organisations. Bakiyev then called early parliamentary elections in December 2007. With the help of new rules that made it exceptionally difficult for parties to pass the two established thresholds, these elections were won by Bakiyev's newly formed Ak Jol party, who thus gained control over the new parliament.

### 1.1.3 Economy

In the late nineteenth century, the Kyrgyz practised transhumance animal husbandry. Their livestock consisted of the 'four cattle' (*tört tülik mal*): camels, horses, sheep-goats and cows. Radloff adds that they herded yaks too (Radloff, 1893:527). My informants claimed that before the revolution, the Kyrgyz diet was made up mostly of meat and dairy products. However, Radloff reports that the Kyrgyz (Kara-Kyrgyz) practised agriculture on a wider scale than the Kazakhs (Kasak-Kyrgyz) (ibid.:528). According to Radloff, they grew wheat, barley and millet, for which they used a carefully maintained system of artificial irrigation (ibid.).

Shahrani notes of the Pamir Kyrgyz, a group of Kyrgyz who fled the communist regimes in the Soviet Union and China, that hunting and collecting were marginal economic activities in the 1970s (Shahrani, 1979:108). It seems likely that the same counted for the pre-revolutionary Tien-Shan Kyrgyz. Radloff writes that the Kara-Kyrgyz only practised hunt for amusement (Radloff, 1893:528). In the time of my fieldwork, my informants mentioned ibex (*gig*) hunts, and I saw many fox and wolf skins decorating the walls. Still, hunting does not appear to have been vital for survival. Collecting of berries, herbs and wild onions was practised during my field research, and presented by my informants as part of the Kyrgyz way of life. Goods such as tea and guns were purchased through trade with settled peoples. Semenov, who travelled in Kyrgyz lands in 1856-1857, tells that the tomb of a hero named Nogay was built by craftsmen from Kashkar, for which his family paid two *iamby* of silver, two camels, five horses and three hundred sheep (Semenov, 1998:167).

Shahrani describes how the Pamir Kyrgyz traded their animal products for grain from their agricultural neighbours, or directly through itinerant traders (Shahrani, 1979:110). The traders very often cheated the Kyrgyz by asking high prices or never

coming back for payments. The nineteenth-century Tien-Shan Kyrgyz had an additional way of purchasing goods: they raided merchant caravans. Explorer Semenov Tien-Shanski mentions an encounter with a group of 'Karakirgiz bandits' of the Saribagish clan who were pillaging a small Uzbek caravan, which was going to Vernoe (presently Almatı) (Semenov, 1998:92).

In summer, the people and their livestock lived in mountain pastures up in the mountains. In winter, they moved down to lower fields where temperatures were higher. The people lived in round tents they called *boz-üy* (grey house, depending on the colour they could be called *ak-üy* (white house) or *kara-üy* (black house) as well) in Kyrgyz. In English, these tents are called yurts, an adaptation of the Russian word *yurta*. The following information about yurts was provided by my informants, based on present-day habits that they regarded as unaltered since time immemorial. The frame of the tents is made of fir wood, the cloth of thick felt. The tents are warm and comfortable and large enough for families to stand, eat, cook and sleep in. They are easily taken down and transported to the next camp site. The lay-out of the yurt is subject to a number of rules and traditions; the right side is for the women (*epchi jak*), the left side for the men (*er jak*) and the place opposite the door, the *tör*, is the place where the most respected guests are seated. The fireplace is in the middle so that smoke can get out through a hole in the roof (*tündük*, now the symbol on the Kyrgyz flag). Decorations play an important part in the interior of the yurt. Usually, there is a decorated chest used to store things in and on, the walls of the yurt are adorned with patterns made of coloured wool curled around reeds, and the felt carpets on the floor are made in various designs. The carpet called *shirdak* is made of a patchwork of coloured felt and the *ala-kiyiz* carpet has the design worked into the carpet during the felting process. Designs are usually abstract forms that resemble the French lily, representing a magic bird.

Wealth was not equally distributed among the nineteenth-century Kyrgyz. Radloff compares the wealth of the Kyrgyz to that of the Kazakh, and implies the existence of the category 'rich':

In general it can be said that the black Kirgis {Kyrgyz} own less cattle than the Kirgis of the Great Horde [Kazakh]. People who have 2000 horses and 3000 sheep already count as extraordinarily rich (Radloff, 1893:527).

In the travel journal of Semenov, we read that he has encountered both impoverished and wealthy Kyrgyz. The poor Kyrgyz were often deprived due to the war between the Bugu<sup>13</sup> and Saribagish clans. Once, Semenov and his group met a group of captives from the Bugu clan who had been abandoned by their Saribagish capturers. They were:

... dragging themselves along, hungry, emaciated and half-clothed, so that we had to share our food with them, in order that they should not starve to death (Semenov, 1998:149).

The wealth of the clan leaders where he stayed as a guest was not so lavish that he spent any words on it. He was more interested in the appearance and character of the people he met than in their wealth and possessions. Semenov does write that when he tried to befriend Umbet-Ala, the *manap* of the Saribagish clan, to secure a safe passage through the Tien-Shan, the *manap* reciprocated his gifts with three excellent horses (ibid.:97). This transaction proved to be successful and Semenov did indeed travel the Tien Shan safely. It is not unlikely that traders for whom the Tien Shan was a part of their trading route engaged in similar contracts with the leaders of Kyrgyz clans. For these agreements to work, it was vital that the leaders exerted a degree of control over their subjects. The case of Semenov's agreement suggests that Umbet-Ala did have the necessary amount of authority. Previous to the agreement, Semenov and his party feared the Saribagish and avoided them where they could. Later, the bond of friendship (called *tamyr* by Semenov) with Umbet-Ala even helped Semenov to persuade the Saribagish to let go their Bugu captives (ibid.:179).

In the Soviet period, Kyrgyz pre-revolutionary society was typified as feudal, which made the richer Kyrgyz into feudal lords who extorted their serfs and slaves. This image can be nuanced, however, if we remember that wealth was counted in livestock – a highly perishable good in the harsh mountain climate. The richer Kyrgyz were therefore highly dependent on the poorer for their labour to keep the livestock intact and flourishing. Shahrani explains that among the Pamir Kyrgyz in the 1970s:

... this stratification has not caused any serious confrontation or conflict between the very rich and the very poor. On the contrary, the existing ties of kinship, friendship, and affinity in many cases have been strengthened through herding arrangements between rich and poor relations, while new ties based on economic interdependence have developed (Shahrani, 1979:182).

---

<sup>13</sup> Semenov speaks of the Bogintsy, a Russified form of the Kyrgyz word Bugu. He has also Russified the name of *manap* Boronbai and turned it to Burambai.

It seems likely that among the nineteenth-century Tien Shan Kyrgyz, a similar mechanism was at work. One informant said to me that there were rich people among the Kyrgyz, but it depended on the person himself. Whether you were rich or not was determined by what kind of person you were. On the other hand, he also knew of the existence of slavery among the Kyrgyz, and assumed that people were slaves by birth, for the suffix *-kul* in personal names indicated their status as slaves.



*Figure 1.2 Herding in the summer pasture (jailoo)*  
*Photography: Timothy Scott*

The main basis for Kyrgyzstan's economy is still animal husbandry. Transhumance is still part of the herding technique, but nowadays it is not the entire clan or village that moves to the summer pastures. Most people remain in the village, and a number of shepherds take the livestock into the mountain pastures (*jailoo*). Next to herding, the cultivation of vegetables, fruit, nuts, cotton, hemp and tobacco is an important source of income. A large part of the industry is made up of agro processing and mining. Kyrgyzstan has a number of gold, coal, uranium and other mineral mines. Most of the mining sector has declined dramatically since independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. The exception is formed by gold mining, which attracted foreign investment. The Canadian Cameco gold mining company obtained a 33% interest in an agreement with the Kyrgyz state company

*Kyrgyzaltın* to exploit the Kumtor goldmine in the Tien Shan range, south of Lake Issykköl. The government remains an important source of employment. The informal economy is another important pillar of Kyrgyzstan's economy, accounting for almost 40% of the GNP in 2000, mostly in street vending (Schneider, 2002).

Kyrgyzstan very rapidly became a poor country when the infrastructure of the Soviet Union suddenly collapsed. Collective farms and factories were no longer supplied with fuel and other raw materials and the market structure fell apart. The government under president Akayev opted to apply the so-called 'shock therapy' method for economic reform that was promoted by the IMF and the World Bank (Abazov, 1999). Shock therapy has as its main goal a quick implementation of economic reform, in a concentrated period of less than two years, with a focus on reaching a macroeconomic equilibrium. In Kyrgyzstan, this meant that the system of central planning and state-controlled prices and subsidies was abandoned. State property such as houses, factories and land was privatised<sup>14</sup>. Although after a free-fall of six years the economy did indeed show signs of recovery in terms of GDP, the effects on the standard of living for most of the population was negative, according to Abazov, a Kyrgyzstani political scientist at the Columbia University (ibid.). He explains that the Soviet state had used overstaffing as a means to hide unemployment, and had used price control to maintain a good standard of living. When this state-controlled system was abandoned so quickly, unemployment, economic passivity and poverty were the immediate results. Next to this, as Abakov puts it:

Withdrawal of the state from playing an active role in economic development and maintaining law and order led to the growth of the so-called 'robber-capitalism' and created a chaotic business environment (Abakov, 1999).

Many of my informants spoke approvingly of Uzbekistan, that had rejected the shock therapy, and wished that Kyrgyzstan's government had chosen a similar route of gradual and controlled reform.

Outside observers may find it difficult to estimate the true extent of poverty in Kyrgyzstan. A Dutch OSCE election observer who had stayed in Naryn for three months for the 2000 parliament elections asserted to me that there was hardly any poverty in Kyrgyzstan. Everywhere she went, the table was loaded with food. She seemed not to realise that the rules of Kyrgyz hospitality require an excess of food, and that people had probably drawn on their entire social network to feed their esteemed foreign guests

---

<sup>14</sup> At first, land was divided and leased by individuals for 99 years, only in 1999 did it become possible to buy land.



properly. It was not until my second year in Kyrgyzstan that I began to witness glimpses of the true effects of the crumbling economy. One day, a befriended couple confided that they did not have any money left to buy food. It was days away until the husband's salary was expected, but the cupboards were empty. I gave them some money and stayed home to baby-sit for the two children. When my friends came home from the market with a bag of flour and some sugar, the children burst into singing and dancing in a way I had not even seen Dutch children rejoice over a beautiful birthday cake.

A factor that makes poverty hard to deal with for most Kyrgyz is the shrill contrast with the relative wealth and security they had experienced in the Soviet era. Basic needs such as bread, health care and education, but also pleasures such as an evening at the cinema and eating ice cream had been available to everyone. Now, daily life has turned bleak and a struggle to survive. In the late 1990s, the time of my fieldwork, people often mentioned the loss of simple pleasures. For villagers, it was no longer enjoyable to go to Bishkek, because the attractions of the city had become unaffordable. One day when my German friend and I were laughing out loud, a Kyrgyz old man sighed: 'Such a long time ago that our Kyrgyz girls could laugh like this!'<sup>15</sup>

The increase in prices, inflation and loss of sources of income has fuelled corruption. Those who maintained a position with relative power often find only one way to make ends meet: capitalise on that power in a downward direction. A policeman or a school teacher who does not receive enough wages from the government will extract money from those who depend on him or her. This way, the burden for public services falls on the very poor rather than being shared through a tax system. Generally, however, there is a lot of tolerance for this petty corruption. If people do not make enough money to live on, what are they to do? The corruption of high government officials who put foreign loans into the refurbishment of their luxury homes is mostly regarded with resignation – it is seen as annoying and offensive, but that is what the rich do. In 2005, this resignation quite unexpectedly turned into action when the president was ousted. Unfortunately, nothing seems to have changed with regard to corruption. The system of all-pervasive corruption and nepotism paralyses many people in their personal initiative and upward mobility. On the other hand, this system also provides social survival and advancement in Kyrgyzstan. It

---

<sup>15</sup> During a previous research in Namibia, I met people far poorer. But since this had been the state they experienced since birth, they seemed more accepting, though not painlessly, of their poverty. For the people in Kyrgyzstan, there was always the memory of better times.

may not be easy to find one's way in this web of dependency, but it is the game one has to play.

#### 1.1.4 Social Organisation of the Kyrgyz: Family Structure and Politics

At the time of my fieldwork, the Kyrgyz traced their descent patrilineally. Surnames are based on a person's father, in that a person inherits either their father's surname (for instance, president Akayev's son is called Aidar Akayev and his daughter Bermet Akayeva), or their surname becomes the first name of the father followed by *uulu* (his son) or *kızı* (his daughter) (for example the son of one of my Manaschi informants, whose name is Kazat Taalantaali Uulu). Furthermore, descent is based on knowing one's seven fathers (*jeti ata*), that is the patrilineage up to the seventh generation. In enumerations of a person's seven fathers, the seventh father is often primal father. An informant once listed his seven fathers for me, with the name of his seventh father coinciding with the name of his family's sub-clan. When I asked what the seventh father of his son was, he became slightly confused and was not sure whether he should skip a father or make the sub-clan's name the eighth father of his son. Every Kyrgyz person is supposed to know his or her seven fathers, first of all because it is proof of being 'a good Kyrgyz', and secondly it is needed to maintain a marriage taboo. The Kyrgyz consider marriages between people from the same fathers up to the seventh generation out of bounds. Marriage with a person from one's mother's line is allowed, even if he or she is a first cousin. A number of informants told me that this is because 'blood goes through the father'. Although the family of a daughter-in-law (*kelin*), the *kuda*, are treated with high respect, children belong to the family of the father and should stay there in case of separation or death of the mother. The Kyrgyz observe patrilocality: generally, the bride moves to the household of her husband's parents after (or during) the wedding. After a few years they may move out to a home of their own. Ideally, the youngest son and his family never move out but remain in the house of their parents, taking care of them in old age.

Figure 1.3 presents a genealogy of Kyrgyz kinship terms as I found them in the village Kazibek in the province Narin. Most noticeable is that terms for relatives on the father's side differ entirely from the terms for relatives on the mother's side. Furthermore, relative's age is a distinguishing factor: one's older sister is addressed with a different term than one's younger sister. People address one another by their first names followed with the appropriate kinship term – whether they are actual kin or not. Implicit in these terms is a high respect for older generations. This carries far: older siblings are addressed with the

polite *sız* (you) instead of the informal *sen* (you). I encountered a number of situations where an older brother had demanded to adopt a younger brother's child when he remained childless himself. Family relations that were out of the ordinary, such as adopted children, second wives, or illegitimate children were a source of shame and embarrassment, and not openly spoken of. However, after staying with a family for a number of weeks, I was often told – in a low voice – about the true nature of relationships.

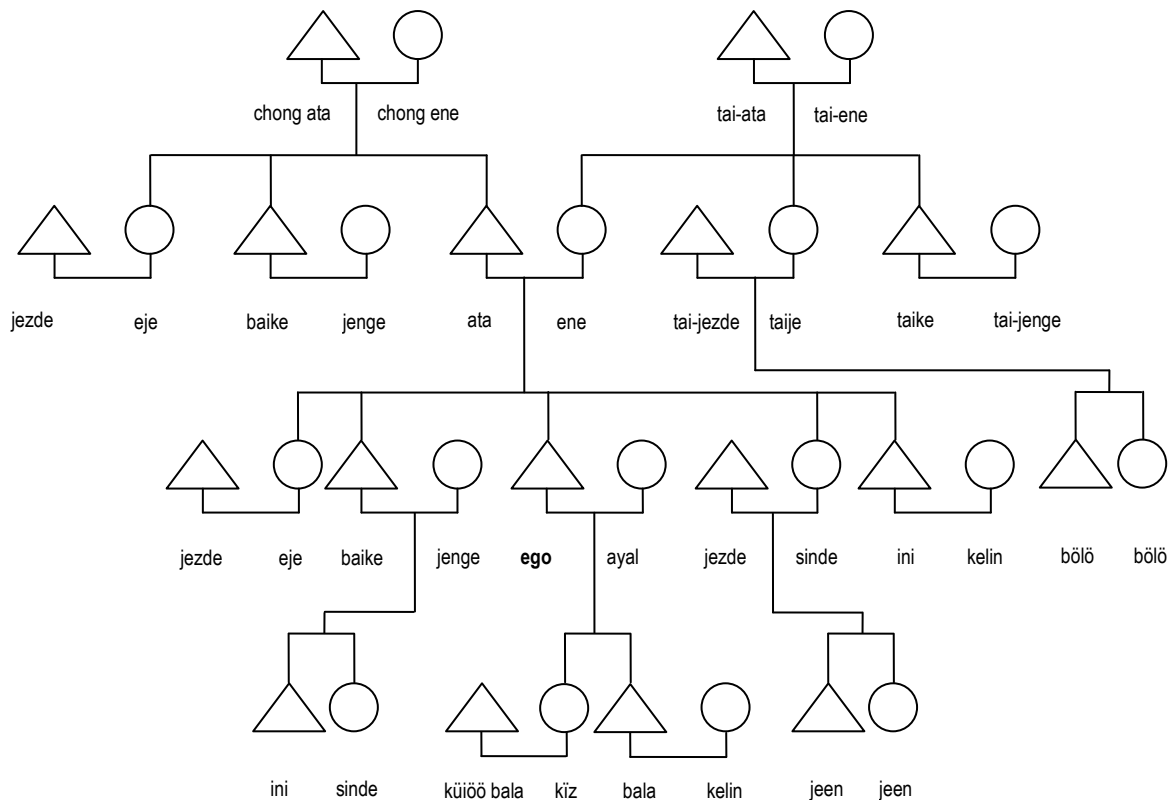


Figure 1.3 Kyrgyz kinship terms

Political leadership among the Kyrgyz was traditionally family and clan based. Ideas on leadership among the nineteenth-century Kyrgyz has been subject to the Soviet political tunnel view, which made the term *bi-manap* stand for a group of despotic tyrants. Saul Abramzon, a Soviet historian and ethnographer, wrote that at the end of the nineteenth century, the Kyrgyz already had a society with patriarchal-feudal characteristics (Ambramzon, 1971:155). He explains:

Before the Great October Revolution, the mass of the Kyrgyz population owned comparatively small herds. At the head of certain groups of the population stood feudal-tribal nobles personified by *bis* and *manaps*. The exploitation of the workers

by manaps and bis occurred in the framework of the penetration of social life with the ideology of ‘tribal unity’ and ‘tribal solidarity’ which found its expression in many forms of the patriarchal-tribal mode of life (ibid.:157).

The ideas of exploitation and despotism of the *bis* and *manaps* may not have come totally out of the blue, for Radloff reported that:

The division of lineages is entirely as among the Kasak-Kyrgyz. In stead of Sultans, however, they had lords elected from the black [i.e. ordinary] people, that they called Manap. The Manaps, I was told, had exerted almost despotic authority over their subjects (Radloff, 1893:533).

Daniel Prior describes the situation as follows:

There is no doubt that the institution of manaps was brought on in part by the fragmented Kirghiz tribes’ craving for security, yet the tyrannical power of these chieftains amounted to despotism and became an extra burden on the population. There was much to bear in their lot: while attempting to live as they were being squeezed politically, militarily, and economically by Kokand, China, the Kazakhs, and later Russia, most tribes existed in a state of constant movement and readiness for battle (Prior, 2002:50).

Semenov, however, only mentions one instance of a despotic ruler, namely Vali-khan of Kashkar<sup>16</sup>, saying that he was noted for great brutality (Semenov, 1998:197).

Shahrani describes an entirely different version of leadership among the Pamir Kyrgyz in the 1970s. Of course, it is impossible to extrapolate their society directly to the nineteenth-century Tien-Shan Kyrgyz. Although the Pamir Kyrgyz faced a lot less interference from a larger state than the Tien-Shan Kyrgyz, their permanent migration to the high summer pastures of the Pamirs, as well as the loss of ties with the other Kyrgyz groups, must have had an impact on the political sphere as well. However, their case does bring into light a different possible political organisation among the Kyrgyz, which opens the mind to new readings of the role of nineteenth-century leaders. Furthermore, Shahrani’s descriptions of leadership coincides strongly with the position of elders (*aksakal*) and heads of the family during my fieldwork, although these had a less clear political position vis-à-vis the state of Kyrgyzstan.

---

<sup>16</sup> This was not Valikhanov’s grandfather but another Vali-khan. Semenov writes that he decided to ask the Governor-general to send Valikhanov, ‘the only Kirgiz with a European education’, to Kashkar to find out more about the death of the missing explorer Adolf Schlagintweit (Semenov, 1998:197).

The Pamir Kyrgyz were headed by a *khan* in the 1970s. The term *khan* was known in the Tien Shan in the nineteenth century, but it was hardly ever used for (or by) a Kyrgyz leader<sup>17</sup>. The headmen of different clans (*uruu*) were called *manap*. Other titles for public functions were *bek* (a military rank) and *bi* (judge). The dispersion of the various Kyrgyz clans under different states (Khokand, China, Russia) probably prevented the rise of a single *khan*. The Pamir Kyrgyz, in their isolation from a larger state, had located the upper authority amongst themselves. Shahrani describes three layers of leadership: the headman of a camp (*qorow*) is called a *be*, the headman of a clan (*oruq*) is an *aqsaqal*, and the *khan* heads all of them (Shahrani, 1979:164). Of the *aqsaqal* (litt: white beard), Shahrani writes:

The *aqsaqal* is expected to be a man over forty years of age, known for his impartiality and good judgement. The position is not elective or hereditary. Rather a man is acknowledged by the members of a group as they turn to him for help, advice, or the mediation of conflicts. Therefore, the position is attained through public approval and maintained as long as such consent continues without public challenge from another member. The *aqsaqal* is treated in public gatherings with such special attention as seating him in the place of honor. He acts as the spokesman for his group in all matters of public or private concern, and represents the interests of his membership to the *khan*, and through him to the local government (ibid.:156).

Shahrani does not elaborate on the position of the camp elder (*be*). About the *khan* he says the following:

The office of the *khan* is the single vehicle through which the unity of the Kirghiz community is achieved. (...) The rank of *khan* is nonhereditary in principle nor is it elective or ascribed. Instead, it is generally assumed by the most obvious candidate, usually the *aqsaqal* of one large and powerful *oruq*, and is legitimated through public consent by the Kirghiz and/or recognized by external forces – local government authorities or outsiders such as the neighbouring Wakhi, traders, visitors, and so forth. (...) strong and effective leadership qualities in Kirghiz society entail bravery (military prowess in the past), honesty, abilities in public persuasion and oratory, sound judgement, being a good Muslim, membership in a large *oruq*, and of course success as a herdsman, with a large flock and wealth in

---

<sup>17</sup> Daniel Prior mentions that the leader of the Sarıbagış, Ormon, had taken the un-heard of step of having himself proclaimed *khan*. He was killed in 1855, a year before Semenov befriended his successor, *manap* Umbet-Ala.

other tangible goods. (...) what is important in this instance is not the possession of goods and animals, but how they are used to help the community. Hospitality, generosity, and the offer of help to one's relatives and to the needy and poor, stand out as the signs of being a good Muslim and are personal qualities desired among the politically ambitious in Kirghiz society. (...) His role is very often reconciliatory and mediational (...) He does not have a police force and does not bring individuals to trial (ibid.:164, 165).

If we compare the ethnographic study of Shahrani with what we know of the nineteenth-century Kyrgyz, we find that first of all, the leaders of the different clans played a central role in the reception of guests. Valikhanov, Semenov and Radloff were all fed, entertained and given a place to sleep in the households of the chiefs. Semenov mentions a night spent at the camp of the nobles of the Bugu of Boronbai's clan. They were received by Baldisan, a Bugu of 'blue blood', who was 'peace-loving by nature', did not participate in the bloody strife, never went on a raid, but busied himself with music (he played the *dombra*<sup>18</sup>) and listening to 'the songs of folk-tale narrators and improvisers' (Semenov, 1998:181). The night that Semenov stayed at his camp, Baldisan played the *dombra* for him and called on the bards to recite poetry for his guests.

Semenov also elaborates extendedly on the war between the Sarıbagış and the Bugu that was in full swing during his travels in the Tien Shan. He assigns an important role to the leaders (*manap*) in these wars by focussing his descriptions of the motives and effects of the war on the leaders personally. He speaks of the leaders as if they single-handedly decide on the fate of their subjects, as in the following passage:

One of the powerful Bogintsy [Bugu] clans, the Kydyk, led by Biy Samkala, and bearing the same relationship to Burambai [Boronbai] as the appanage princes did to the grand princes in ancient Russia, had quarrelled with the chief Bogintsy manap and having detached himself from him, decided to move with his whole clan, numbering 3,000 men capable of carrying weapons, beyond the Tian'-Shan', across the Zauka Pass. The Sarybagysh, who already occupied the whole southern littoral of Issyk-kul' (Terskei), insidiously let the rebellious Kydyk go through to the Zauka Pass, but when the latter with all their flocks and herds were ascending the pass, they attacked from both sides (...) and completely routed them. (...)

---

<sup>18</sup> The *dombra* is today considered to be the Kazakh national instrument. The Kyrgyz instrument is the *komuz*. Semenov's report that Baldisan played the *dombra* can be explained in two ways: either the ethnic division of instruments was not as strict then as it is now, or Semenov wrote down the translation given to him by his Kazakh interpreter. The latter is not far-fetched, given that Semenov corrupts words more often.

However, old Burambai grieved not so much for the losses of the Kydyk, who had wilfully defected from him, as for the loss of all his territory in the Issyk-kul' basin, of his arable land and small orchards on the river Zauka and for the female captives of his family (ibid.:145).

Whether this view on the position of the leaders as all-powerful reflects the actual situation, or whether Semenov projected an ethnocentric view on the Kyrgyz, remains a question.

There appears to have been a certain sense of unity among the different Kyrgyz clans in the nineteenth century. Russian observers speak of the Kara-Kyrgyz or the Dikokamennye-Kyrgyz as distinct from the Kasak-Kyrgyz. It is unclear what the basis of this distinction was, however. There appears to have been no political form for unity or federation in the nineteenth century. At some point, the different clans that are known as Kyrgyz today even fell under three different states: the Southern Kyrgyz were ruled by the khanate of Khokand, most Northern clans were subjected to Russia and the Solto fell under Chinese rule. Two of the Northern clans, the Bugu and Sarıbagış, were involved in a bloody feud. Still, they are presented as one group by outsider contemporaries and present-day historians.

The clan structure appears to have been fluid and flexible. Although according to legend, the name Kyrgyz may have come from '*kırk üz*', meaning forty clans, there is no conclusive enumeration of precisely forty clans. Kyrgyz genealogists (*sanjirachi*) provide very detailed family trees, but none are the same. Sub-divisions of clans can become important units in their own right, others lose their importance over time. Although there is a distinction between *ulut* (people, the Kyrgyz), *uruu* (clan, e.g. Bugu, Cherik) and *uruk* (sub-clan, e.g. Sarı-Kalpak, Akchubak), these divisions are not as clear-cut as the terminology suggests.

It seems likely that clan membership was patrilineal in the nineteenth century, as it is today. However, Daniel Prior quotes G. Zagriazhskii, 'an observer in 1873', who gives an entirely different account of clan membership:

The membership of a Kirghiz to one tribe or another is not permanent and unchanged. One of them has merely to move from the Sarıbagış lands to the Solto, and he will not be called a Sarıbagış, he becomes a Solto. Moving to the Sayaks, he becomes a Sayak [...], but this may only be said of the common people, the *bukhara* [...] *Manaps* preserve the division into tribes, and strictly maintain them (Zagriazhskii in Prior, 2002:70).

It has become fashionable to describe contemporary Kyrgyz politics as tribal, with clan members favouring each other. A joke I heard on a bus, told by a Kyrgyz passenger, makes clear that region overrules clan in this respect:

A bus driver walks up to a passenger and asks him: ‘Are you from Kemin?’ (Kemin is the birth place of Akayev)? The passenger replies: ‘No.’ ‘Are you from Talas, then?’ (Talas is the birth place of Akayev’s wife) The passenger replies: ‘No.’ ‘Then take your feet off the chair!’

#### 1.1.5 Ethnicity, religion and language

Three important markers that characterise a country are ethnic composition, religion and languages of the population. These markers are especially strong because they link up easily to global images and patterns in an individual’s world view. Islam in Kyrgyzstan will be linked to Islam in one’s home country, the Islamic states in the Middle-East and nowadays almost inescapably to Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism. The ratio of ethnic groups and its meaning for ethnic relations will be compared to those at home and elsewhere and fit into one’s understanding of global settlement and migration patterns. Knowing what languages are spoken falls into the jigsaw image of the languages of the world and their attached ethnic affiliations. However, Kyrgyzstan, together with the other post-Soviet countries, has a particular history in these three aspects that need to be kept in mind if one wishes to understand the meaning of ethnicity, religion and language for the people who live in Kyrgyzstan. I will explore this in more detail in chapter four. For the purpose of introduction, a general overview will suffice.

#### Ethnicity

At the end of the Soviet era, the Kyrgyz republic proudly claimed to house more than eighty ethnic groups, or ‘nationalities’<sup>19</sup>. In Soviet terminology, the Kyrgyz were the titular nation of the Kyrgyz SSR, meaning that they were the name-giving ethnic group of the republic. Political power was reduced to a minimum, as well as the sense of ownership of the republic. The right of all nations for self-determination was an important communist slogan, but it was placed second to the socialist project. This led to a dynamic of different freedoms and restrictions at different times, as I will discuss in chapter four. The Kyrgyz SSR was inhabited by people from many other ethnic groups, most notably Kyrgyz,

---

<sup>19</sup> The term *nationalnost* is roughly similar to ‘ethnic group’, as it portrays descent and ethnic affiliation without the legal rights and duties of citizenship.



Uzbek, Kazakh, Tajik and Russian. These groups already inhabited the territory at the time of the border demarcation. Over time, more people from all over the Soviet Union settled there, some out of free choice, some with forced migration as punishment and some professionals such as doctors and teachers who were sent to peripheral areas to perform socialist duties. The Kyrgyz SSR, like the other soviet republics, was proud to house over eighty nationalities.

In the years since independence, there has been a significant shift in the ethnic make-up of the country. Most notable is the halving of the percentage of Russian inhabitants. The rapid decline of economic and emotional security led Russians, Germans and Jews to move ‘back’ to Russia, Germany or Israel. Apart from these push factors, there were pull factors for the migrants as well. The governments of Germany and Israel offered preferential access to their ‘compatriots’ from the former Soviet Union, who were regarded as finally having the chance to come home. Although the entire population of Kyrgyzstan was well educated, it was the Russians and other Europeans who often held high positions, and their exit caused important shifts in the labour market. In the 1989 population census, a slight majority of the people claimed Kyrgyz ethnicity. Russians formed the second largest group, and together with other Slavic groups they formed almost a third of the population. In the 1999 census, almost two-third of the population claimed Kyrgyz ethnicity, and the Uzbeks had become the second largest group (see table 1.1).

*Table 1.1 Ethnic groups in Kyrgyzstan according to the 1989 and 1999 population census.*  
Source: UNDP LIFE project<sup>20</sup>

Ethnic group	1989 census	%	1999 census	%
Kyrgyz	2,229,663	52.4	3,128,147	64.9
Russian	916,558	21.5	603,201	12.5
Uzbek	550,096	12.9	664,950	13.8
Ukrainian	108,027	2.5	50,442	1.0
German	101,309	2.4	21,471	0.4
Tatar	70,068	1.6	45,438	0.9
Dungan <sup>21</sup>	36,928	0.9	51,766	1.1

<sup>20</sup> <http://life.undp.kg/main1.html>

<sup>21</sup> Dungan is the term used by the Soviet authorities to describe Muslim people of Han Chinese origin. Their ancestors fled to Kyrgyzstan after a rebellion in the nineteenth century

In the Soviet Union, ethnicity (*natsionalnost*) was registered in individual passports. After independence, the passport entry was removed, but soon re-installed. *Natsionalnost* (Kyrgyz: *ulut*) had become an important identity marker, and both the population and administration did not want to do without it.

Outside of Kyrgyzstan, there are a number of Kyrgyz communities. In China, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and until recently Turkey, there are groups of ethnic Kyrgyz who settled there after they fled the Soviet regime, or who found themselves outside when the borders were drafted. Nomadic movement and transhumance were not taken into account when the national boundaries were determined. Interestingly, the Chinese government recognises the Manas epic as one of the great folk epics of China.

### Religion

After 70 years of Soviet governance, it seems odd to find religion so much alive in Kyrgyzstan. However, the Soviet Union was officially committed to freedom of religion, although it also agitated against the anti-class interests of organised religions (Stalin, 1948:77). Thus in Soviet times, the republics of Central Asia and several others were referred to as the Muslim Republics without a problem. There had been campaigns to open up people's eyes to the backwardness of Islam and other religions. Many Muslims abandoned habits of wearing headscarves, praying and visiting mosques. But being Muslim remained a part of the identity of most Turkic people, entangled with their ethnic identity. So even today, being Kyrgyz is being a Muslim, and when one asks a Kyrgyz if he or she is Muslim, the answer will often be: 'Of course, I am Kyrgyz!' From that same perspective, a Kyrgyz friend sadly shook his head when we passed a group of Christian converts, saying: 'And that is five less Kyrgyz...' Other Turkic groups such as Uzbeks, Kazakhs and Tatars also combine ethnicity with (Sunni) Islam. There are also a number of non-Turkic Muslim groups in Kyrgyzstan, such as the Tajiks and Dungans.

A Muslim identity in Kyrgyzstan is more than just a derivative of ethnicity, however. Muslim practices, behaviour and beliefs also play a role. 'Reading the *Kuran*', an expression for the recital of the first *sura* of the K'uran, followed by personal prayers in Kyrgyz, is a recurring ritual through which Kyrgyz people experience and express their Muslim identity. In these prayers, the *arbaktar* (spirits) of one's ancestors or of Kyrgyz heroes are often called upon. This, in combination with the importance placed on the divinity of nature, leads many observers to think of the Kyrgyz as 'superficially Muslims with shamanistic beliefs'. As Bruce Privratsky points out in his study on Islam in

Kazakhstan, however, ancestor spirits and the forces of nature play a significant role in many Muslim belief systems all over the world (Privratsky, 2001). Thus there is no need to deny the Kyrgyz claim that they are Muslims. The need is rather in adjusting the image of Islam.

Most of my informants stated that Uzbeks are 'more Muslim' than Kyrgyz, and Southern Kyrgyz are 'more Muslim' than Northerners. With this, they refer to the way people keep to the rules of Islam. Northern Kyrgyz often spoke of the way the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks of the South keep their women subordinate. Also the rules of not eating pork or drinking alcohol are kept more strictly in the South. However, although very few Northern Kyrgyz refrain from drinking alcohol, knowing that one is supposed to still reminds them of their Muslimness.

Mosque attendance is not a heavy obligation for most Kyrgyzstani Muslims. Since independence, the number of mosques has grown rapidly, however. According to the head of the State Agency for Religious Affairs Toigonbek Kalmatov there were 39 mosques in Kyrgyzstan in 1991, and another 1,000 without official status. In 2007, the Spiritual Directorate of Kyrgyz Muslims unites over 1,725 religious objects (seven regional administrations in Osh and Bishkek cities, one university, six institutes, 45 madrasahs and Koran classes, three missions of foreign Muslim faith, 26 centres, foundations and unions and 1,619 mosques)<sup>22</sup>. The popularity of the Turkish-Kyrgyz Lyceum is an important factor in raising a new generation of more or less devote Muslims. During my research I met very few Muslims with an interest in fundamentalist ideas of Islam. However, there is a process of rediscovery of Islamic values and practices, and many people have a keen interest in learning the right ways of doing things. I can therefore not exclude the possibility that fundamentalism will gain a hold among Kyrgyzstan's Muslim population.

Other religions that are practised in Kyrgyzstan are Russian Orthodox Christianity and Judaism. The Russian Orthodox Churches that can be found in Kyrgyzstan's cities are experiencing an increase in church attendance, especially with festivals such as Easter. In Bishkek there is a small synagogue, but no rabbi. Since independence, missionary groups of different Christian persuasions, Jehovah's Witnesses, Bahai and other faiths have come to Kyrgyzstan to acquaint the population of the former Soviet Union with their beliefs (Pelkmans, 2007:881-899).

---

<sup>22</sup> <http://eng.24.kg/community/2007/10/29/3764.html>, last visited 01-02-2008

## Language

The state language in Kyrgyzstan is Kyrgyz. This is a Turkic language that is categorised in various families by different linguists, such as the Chagatai, Nogai and Altai language families. Kyrgyz was standardised in the early Soviet years on the basis of the Northern dialect (Korth, 2005:78). Soviet scholars first used the Arabic script, the then-current script for Turkic languages. In 1925, a transition to the Latin alphabet was set in, and in 1937, this was replaced by Cyrillic (ibid.:78-81). After independence, there were repeated calls for changing the script back to Latin. Although in Uzbekistan this idea was turned into a policy, in Kyrgyzstan the discussion did not surpass the question whether the new alphabet should be based on the English or Turkish transliteration of phonemes such as *ü*, *ï* and *ö*. These sounds occur in Turkish, but are absent in English. The Turkish alphabet is thus far better equipped for Kyrgyz. Politically, however, most Kyrgyz would rather connect to the Anglophone world than the Turkophone.

Although Kyrgyz is the state language, a large number of Kyrgyzstani do not speak it<sup>23</sup>. Non-Kyrgyz only rarely speak the language, as this was not necessary nor promoted in Soviet times. Since independence, attempts to teach Kyrgyz to non-Kyrgyz have started enthusiastically, but over time have ceased to be popular. On top of this, many urbanised, Russified Kyrgyz also do not speak ‘their own language’<sup>24</sup>. They were educated in Russian and ceased to speak Kyrgyz. During Soviet times, the lingua franca was Russian, and has remained so after independence.

In 2000<sup>25</sup>, Russian was awarded the status of ‘official language’ of Kyrgyzstan. This decision emanated from the acknowledgement of the lingering importance of Russian, and from the wish to keep peace with the Russians inside and outside of Kyrgyzstan. Next to the state language and the official language, many other languages are spoken in Kyrgyzstan. Only Uzbek and Tajik are used as languages of teaching next to Kyrgyz and Russian. In the year 2000 there were 138 Uzbek and 2 Tajik schools (UNDP, 2000). There

---

<sup>23</sup> It is hard to find figures on how many people speak Kyrgyz. In the population census, most people of Kyrgyz ethnicity filled in Kyrgyz as their native tongue, whether they spoke it or not. There was no question that reflected actual language proficiency or use.

<sup>24</sup> The idea that a native language is the language of one’s ethnic group rather than the first language one has learned is common-place in the former Soviet Union. Thus, the remark that a person does not speak his own language makes perfect sense.

<sup>25</sup> In December 1996, the constitutional court accepted an amendment to the Constitution that gave Russian the status of official language. This amendment was rejected by the parliament, however. Four years later, the discussion was taken up again and in May 2000, the legislative assembly passed the law *On the Official Language of the Kyrgyz Republic* (Korth, 2005:119-120).

were 1259 Kyrgyz and 133 Russian schools. For a further elaboration on the topic of language policy and the sociolinguistics of Kyrgyzstan, see chapter four.

## **1.2 Research Methodology**

### **1.2.1 Background of the Research**

I started this research in 1996 when I obtained a VSB scholarship from the cultural fund of a bank in the Netherlands. After one year of fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan, I was admitted to a Ph.D. programme at the Amsterdam School for Social science Research at the University of Amsterdam, where I prepared for another year of fieldwork that took place in 1999-2000. On my return, a burn-out forced me to postpone the writing stage until 2005. In that year, I obtained a scholarship provided by the Koninklijke Hollandsche Maatschappij der Wetenschappen. This scholarship came from the legacy of nineteenth-century Dutch mayor Pieter Langerhuizen Lambertszoon.

My choice for the topic and the country came out of personal interest. I had a fascination for the former Soviet Union, and the VSB scholarship provided a perfect opportunity to go and do research there. A job vacancy that I had applied to earlier had put Kyrgyzstan on my map. I do not recall ever having heard of the country before, although I must have learned the name of the republic and its capital during my geography classes at primary and secondary school. I recently found a geography book in the attic, a small booklet that had prepared me for my final exams on the topic of the Soviet Union (Dragt et.al., 1973). At the age of seventeen, I had apparently learned a handful of facts about Central Asia. The book described Central Asia as a desert area, as the land of cotton (ibid.:41). It briefly mentioned Kazakhstan as an arid steppe that housed 40% of the USSR cattle kolkhozes (ibid.:39). For the rest, however, the book dealt with life in the Soviet Union as if it was one big Russia. In the section on religion, only Russian Orthodoxy was mentioned (ibid.:48-50), the *mir* feudal system of farming was presented as the pre-Soviet farming system (ibid.:55), and all examples of daily life were drawn from Russia. Only the very last five pages of the book dealt with ‘the position of the non-Russian peoples’ (ibid.:109-114). Here, the theoretical and real freedoms of the republics were discussed, and figures were given to prove that despite Soviet propaganda, Central Asia was an underdeveloped area. Even this little bit of knowledge had sunk far away, though, and when I prepared for my trip to Kyrgyzstan, both Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia were new to me.

In the process of singling out a topic for research, I concentrated on knowledge. Studying the knowledge that was accumulated in an entirely different part of the world would provide me with a store of new knowledge. But it would also help me gain insight into the underlying assumptions of my own world views, and recognise their limitations. I therefore wanted to study a part of the knowledge system that was vital to the world view of people in Kyrgyzstan. My attention was drawn to the Manas epic by Floor Klijn, an anthropology student from the University of Amsterdam who had been in Kyrgyzstan in 1995. She had witnessed the 'Manas 1,000' celebrations in Talas and told me that the world view of the Kyrgyz converged in the Manas epic.

In Kyrgyzstan I came to give a different explanation of my coming to Kyrgyzstan and studying the Manas epic. When Kyrgyz people asked me why I had come to Kyrgyzstan, I would reply: '*Buyruk*'. *Buyruk* literally means 'command' or 'order', and stands for God's Will. The word is used when people wish to make peace with events in life that happen beyond their own choice or influence. This answer became far more satisfying to me than the idea of chance or personal interest. The idea that coming to Kyrgyzstan was *buyruk* gave meaning and purpose to the moments where I sat listening to Manaschis with goose bumps on my arms, deeply touched by their powerful reciting. It gave a sense of resignation to the moments when I sat lonely among strangers I did not understand, missing my loved ones at home. '*Buyruk*' as an answer was also deeply satisfying for the Kyrgyz people I encountered, who were surprised to meet a foreigner with this much respect for the Kyrgyz language and world view.

### 1.2.2 Research Questions

In the scanty literature available I soon found that the Manas epic is indeed a cultural expression that touches upon many aspects of the world view of people in Kyrgyzstan. The content of the story is made up of daily life experiences, historic and ethnographic data, idealistic and nostalgic images, moral values, and artistic expressions that have meaning for people in Kyrgyzstan. Furthermore, the social context of the epic performance is closely linked to supernatural, political and relational elements of the world view of Kyrgyzstani people. The research questions that I formulated centred around the meaning of the Manas epic for people in Kyrgyzstan. How do they understand, value and use the epic in the creation of their world view?

The celebration of the 1,000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Manas epic in 1995 was an important event very likely to influence the significance of the epic. The celebration was

not only a cultural festival, but strong political meaning was attached to it as well. In the light of this celebration, I formulated my central research question as: “How is the national Manas epic used in state building in Kyrgyzstan?” At the time, I did not realise how much I was dictated by academic fashion in connecting the Manas epic to issues of state building, ethnicity and nationalism. Only in Kyrgyzstan did I notice that virtually every European or American researcher I met, be they anthropologists, sociologists, social geographers, or linguists, combined their research topics with questions of nationalism and ethnicity. I also did not realise that the term ‘national epic’ that I had picked up in various media was not value-free.

My central research question came with many related questions. Very little had been published about the performance of the Manas epic, thus basic questions were open to me. Where did the Manas reciters find their words or their schooling? Was a recital the literal reproduction of a set text, or was it based on improvisation? I was also interested in the social status of the performers, and if there were different ways of performing with according social status. Furthermore, I wanted to gain insight into how much the epic was ‘alive’ in Kyrgyzstan. Who cared about the epic? And what about the political significance, did the idea of the Manas epic as a symbol for national unity appeal to the people? And was it possible to decipher a difference in appreciation of the epic between different ethnic, age, gender, religious and professional groups? Lastly, I wanted to know how much credibility there was to the often-heard cry that the oral performance of the Manas epic was about to die out.

In my preparation for the second year of fieldwork at the Amsterdam School for Social science Research, I broadened the focus of my research to include the language policy in order to study conflicting models of statehood. As in every nation-state, in Kyrgyzstan there is a tension between the models of civic and ethnic nationalism. Both models had achieved validity during Soviet times, and after independence they were still balanced out by individual actors. The use of the Manas epic in state building and the language policy that made Kyrgyz the state language and Russian the official language both work as examples of this eternal balancing act. At that time, my research questions changed to: What was the intention of the Kyrgyz government to make Kyrgyz the official language and to take up the Manas as a symbol for national unity, in regards to ethnic policy? Does the government want a nation dominated by the Kyrgyz ethnic group, or do they want a multi-ethnic nation? Is the government trying to build a new ‘Kyrgyzstani’ identity, as Shirin Akiner suggests for Kazakhstan (Akiner, 1995)? And if so, why do they

insist on making Kyrgyz the official national language and Manas the official symbol for national unity?

My burn-out broke off that line of research, however. Symptoms of lack of energy and concentration span, a diminished access to my short-term and long-term memory and constant restlessness led my Kyrgyzstani friends to speak of the evil eye and the need for asking Great Manaschis for their blessings and sacrificing a sheep. When five years later I was ready to pick up my research, I returned to my main interest: the Manas epic and its meaning for people in Kyrgyzstan. This process has led to the final result of this dissertation: a study on the social significance of the Manas epic in its different social contexts.

### 1.2.3 Research methods and information sources

The field research for this dissertation was conducted between 1996 and 2000. In this period, I spent a total of two years in Kyrgyzstan: one year in 1996/1997, eight months in 1999 and four months in 2000. I lived in various places, alternating between the capital Bishkek, two villages (Kazıbek in Narın Oblast and Törtkül in İssıkköl Oblast) and a town (Karakol) (see map 2, p15). A number of trips took me to Talas and Osh for short visits.

Important to note here is that most elaborate fieldwork was done in the northern oblasts of Kyrgyzstan. The North is generally perceived to be very different from the South (Osh, Jalal-Abad and Batken Oblasts), which has a different political history and is regarded by both Northerners and Southerners as more religious and otherwise influenced by neighbouring Uzbekistan. The Manas epic also plays a role in the South. Government propaganda reaches all over the country, and there are many Manaschis in the South as well. However, as a result of my choices for fieldwork locations, the South remains under-represented in this study.

In all of the places that I stayed, my work comprised of a combination of language study, in-depth interviews and most importantly, participant observation. Living in the homes of people and spending leisure time with them provided relevant insight in the context of the answers I received in formal and informal interviews. My interpretation of my informants' statements gained substantial deepening and broadening when I could combine them with an interpretation of their behaviour. Long-term interaction also played a crucial role in connecting more intimately on a level where people took down their guard and allowed me to look behind the scene. In Kyrgyzstan, however, this proved to be difficult, and with



many of my informants I never formed the intimacy I hoped for for both personal and professional reasons.

In order to obtain information that reflects the world view of my informants as broadly and as close to the Kyrgyzstani context as possible, I refrained from expressing opinions and I kept my questions as open and straightforward as possible. Objectivity in anthropology, as in other social sciences, has since long been discarded as an illusion. First of all, since an anthropologist is a human being, informants adjust their reactions and responses to what they see as appropriate towards the anthropologist. Age, gender, wealth, ethnicity, the status of anthropology as a profession and interactive behaviour of the anthropologist all influence the categorisation process of informants. Informants' responses then depend on their assessment of the appropriate or opportune interaction between themselves and the anthropologist. An anthropologist of different gender, age or ethnicity will gather different, possibly even conflicting, data. Secondly, the information is filtered by the anthropologist, both in the data gathering and the reporting stage. This filtering happens through a complex of filters that the anthropologist has picked up over the years of education, interaction and conscious and subconscious decision making.

Objectivity, then, was never a goal in this research. Rather, I aimed at creating a construction of knowledge on the Manas epic, using a large amount of building materials. I focused on connecting the understanding of my informants to my own understandings, and subsequently on connecting my understanding to the intended readership of this thesis. The knowledge that my informants tried to convey could only come across when it hooked on to components of my knowledge system. In that same way the information presented in this study will only have significance to the reader where it connects to, and complements or alters, his or her knowledge system. The creation of knowledge is a process whereby every individual builds his or her own edifice with the building materials in their possession. Those building materials have arrived from many different sources, in a mix unique for every individual. Also the way the individual will bundle and connect his or her building materials is unique, and based on personal choices as well as the logic of fitting one component into the other. The concept of objectivity as a truth outside this interactive creation merely obscures the fluidity and personal nature of knowledge.

This approach to knowledge, quite common in contemporary western anthropology, induced a specific type of data search. During my field work, I constantly kept an eye out for clues on the building material of Kyrgyzstani knowledge edifices. I found these in explicit explanations by informants and in their information sources, but also in casual

remarks, non-verbal expressions, assumptions that were taken for granted, jokes, the symbolism in banners and other decorations – any form of human expression that revealed some of the building stones of Kyrgyzstani's world view. I was especially interested in the differences between individuals and social groups in collecting, shifting and using their building material. Anthropological data collection happens in interaction, and one of the most important tools for interaction is language. In Kyrgyzstan, two languages are important: Kyrgyz and Russian. In my research on the social significance of the Manas epic, my main focus was on people from the Kyrgyz ethnic group. I therefore decided to learn Kyrgyz first. This would enable me to interact in the linguistic framework of Kyrgyz knowledge systems, and would help me to gather information from interaction between Kyrgyz-speaking people that was not directed at me. It would also help me to understand the text of the Manas epic. What I did not realise at the time when I chose Kyrgyz, was that I gained a large amount of goodwill from people by showing such interest in their lives that I would go as far as to learn their language. What seemed a logical step for me was a pleasant surprise for those whose language had been regarded as 'wild' and 'uncultured' by many Slavs (see also Korth, 2005:161-165). The first two months in Bishkek I took Kyrgyz classes, but it proved hard to find a teacher with good teaching methods and materials. In the first three months in the village Kazıbek I had to get by with a very basic knowledge of Kyrgyz. An English teacher occasionally found time to accompany me on interviews as a translator. After the first half year, my Kyrgyz was sufficient to conduct interviews by myself. In the second year of my research I was taught by Dinara Alıмова, who was an excellent teacher and helped me to fill in many gaps in my understanding of Kyrgyz grammar. Later that year, I had achieved a level that allowed me to teach anthropology classes in Kyrgyz at the American University in Kyrgyzstan.

The importance of Russian in daily life was that great, however, that some knowledge of the language was indispensable. I took Russian language classes in the Netherlands in 1999. Had I spoken Russian before learning Kyrgyz, it would have been hard to learn Kyrgyz. People found it strange to speak Kyrgyz to a European-looking person, and only the lack of another language of communication provided me with enough exposure.

In the two years of my fieldwork, I gathered information from a varied group of informants. Many people whom I met only casually, in transport, at the market or at public gatherings, gave me valuable comments on their lives and world views. I conducted in-depth interviews with key figures, such as (local) politicians, scholars and university deans.

But most importantly, by living in their home stays, I spent many hours of leisure time with a diversity of people, ranging from Manaschis to two-year old boys, young brides and grandfathers. The Manaschis I came to know very well and work with closely were the Great Manaschi Kaba Atabekov and the young Manaschi Talantaali Bakchiev.

Interestingly, these Manaschis were the informants I could relate most easily and openly with. In paragraph 1.3 I give an elaborate description of the places I stayed and the people I lived with.

There were other sources of information. I participated in as many public events as possible. I witnessed a variety of festivals, public holiday celebrations, theatre and music shows, movies, expositions in museums, out-door monuments, scholarly and political conferences and sessions of the parliament (*Jogorku Kengesh*). I was granted permission to observe classes in schools and universities and I participated in the OSCE observation missions of the 2000 parliamentary and presidential elections. The media formed another source for data. Kyrgyz, Russian and English language newspapers were easily available, although their archives were harder to find. Radio and TV offered important input, and on my return to the Netherlands, the internet had become an additional forum for the exchange of knowledge and ideas about Kyrgyzstan. Many Kyrgyz students publish their papers on the internet, and a large number of tourism and news sites provide information on a wide scale of subjects.

Apart from newspapers and websites, written sources of information were hard to get by in Kyrgyzstan. The national library has a catalogues system that I found hard to crack, the collection is far from complete and many books and articles are not available to the public. There is an intricate system of bureaucracy, which led Sarah Amsler, who conducted detailed archive research on the development of sociology in Kyrgyzstan, to remark:

Some (though by no means all) state archivists and librarians in Bishkek work to control knowledge rather than disseminate it (Amsler, 2005:55).

I encountered this mechanism most blatantly when I tried to obtain the official publication of the results of the national census conducted in 1999. I went to the National Statistics Committee at least ten times, and was urged to speak to the head of the Census Committee personally to ask for a copy. She was very proficient in finding ways to keep me dangling, however, and in the end I left Kyrgyzstan without a copy. I had some luck in finding written material in the three general bookshops of Bishkek. A few important books were presented to me by friends and informants, and some other books I found in the streets

where people sold their household effects to obtain cash. I gathered a small and valuable library of books on the Manas and Kyrgyzstan's society, but at the same time felt a lack in my access to existing written sources.

### **1.3 Social context of my fieldwork**

#### **1.3.1 Kazıbek**

The first village I stayed in was Kazıbek, the last village before the border with China. It is still another 100 km to the border, but there are no other permanent villages along the road to China. South and East of Kazıbek there are summer pastures that are in use, however, and the ancient monument Tash Rabat is also situated along the road. Tash Rabat is a stone building that has been dated between the tenth and sixteenth century. The story goes that it was a monastery for Christian Byzantines, but most people see it as a caravan-sarai, an inn where travellers on the Silk Road spent the night.

Kazıbek is in the Narın oblast, a province named after the river that forms the upper reaches of the Sır Darya. The capital town is also called Narın, and is situated by the river, between two mountain ridges. Narın is known as the coldest town in Kyrgyzstan, and has a desolate and crisp beauty. The town has extended public facilities, among which a central market, a town hall, a police station, a bus and trolleybus station, a cinema and a theatre. In 1993, a mosque was built with money from Saudi Arabia, which now stands as the most attractive building in town. At the southern exit of the town, one passes a Kyrgyz cemetery. Like other Kyrgyz cemeteries, the graves are overarched by metal structures in the shape of yurtas, embellished with crescent moons and pictures of the deceased.

The road leads directly into the mountains, with a pass that is dangerous to cross in the harsh winters so familiar to the region. A silhouette of Lenin used to tower over the road. In 1997, this silhouette was taken down, only to be replaced with a similar silhouette of president Akayev (see figure 1.4). This was a very rare occasion, as Akayev did not engage in a personality cult like a number of his colleagues in other republics. A few kilometres further along the road from Narın to China, the Tien Shan mountain ridge comes into view. This ridge provides a breath-taking view, with its snowy-white, sharp peaks that look like castles against an almost always clear blue sky. The road leads into At Bashı, a small town that also hosts a market and a cinema, a club house, a post office, several schools and local administration buildings. But before entering At Bashı, one can also take a turn to the East, entering a road that passes four more villages and many more

breath-taking views before it comes to the village Kızıltuu (Red Flag). Turn left here, towards the mountains, and the dirt road will take you to Kazıbek village (*Kazıbek ayılı*).



*Figure 1.4 Silhouette of president Askar Akayev along the road to At-Bashi*

Kazıbek used to be called *Pogranichnik*, which is Russian for Border Guard, but was renamed after the poet Kazıbek in 1993. Kazıbek Mambetimin uulu was born in 1902 in the foothills near present-day Kazıbek village. His parents were accused of being *manaps* in 1929, and Kazıbek was sent to the *gulag* in Orenburg with them. In 1931, Kazıbek was released, but arrested for the second time in 1934, this time until 1936. As he had been an ‘enemy of the people’, most of his writings have been destroyed. Nevertheless, his fame stems mostly from his oral recitals for the people of Narin. The place and time of his death are unknown (Asanov, 1998:229).

Kazıbek lies on a flat plain at the foot of the Tien Shan mountain ridge. The outstretched plain lies at about 3,000m height, the mountain peaks to the South East reach up to 5 km. Although the place can get severely cold, with temperatures under  $-40^{\circ}\text{C}$ , the sun almost always shines. The sun brightens up the village, and even in winter, many people enjoy sitting outside. The wide-spread habit of illegal tapping of electricity helps people to keep warm. But cold is still very much a part of daily life in Kazıbek, and people fear it so much that they always take good care to dress themselves and their children very warmly.



*Figure 1.5 Kazıbek village*

The village consist of a few unpaved streets, a couple of water wells in the streets, home-built houses in Russian-peasant style, a large school building, a hospital, a nearly empty Soviet-style shop, an empty and run-down park next to disused bath house and kolkhoz buildings, a club house and an *akimiat*, a local government building. Obtaining statistics on the number of inhabitants from the *akimiat* proved to be very difficult – information like that was treated as a valuable and secret scarcity. The *akim* told me that at the time of our interview in December 1996, the village counted 589 families and 2,939 persons. It was 38 km removed from the rayon capital At-Bashı and lay at an altitude of 2,380 meters.

The *akim* explained that Kazibek used to be part of a kolkhoz together with four other villages. Since 1992, the village is divided into six units, consisting of five tribes<sup>26</sup> (*Düshümbü, Mamik, Jabike, Karasakal* (the tribe of my host family) and *Küchük-uluu*) and the small neighbouring village *Jangï-küch* (New Strength). All six units have a chief, who is also a member of the *akimate*. According to the *akim*, they are responsible for organising their people for autumn and spring work. Each family has their own plot of land, but it is the tribe that divides the machinery, such as tractors, ploughs and fuel. The tribe leaders also organise cultural works, they are responsible for raising the children and they propagate a life without alcohol or stealing, the *akim* said. This is a daily job, for which they receive a salary. The tribe leaders have been elected by the members of their clan, the *akim* himself was appointed by the rayon *akim* after recommendation by a group of twelve village deputies.

The *akim* explained that between 1992 and 1996, the village *akim* had no power. This led to chaos, according to the *akim*:

The tribe leaders were responsible for dividing the sheep and machinery, but people sold their sheep for money to buy soap, clothes and alcohol. During Soviet times, all goods had been communal property, but after independence, everyone suddenly felt rich (*bai*). Crime and alcoholism increased. But then the village *akim* was given the power to organise an *akimate*, and with the backing of the government, this office was respected. People began to be more economical and to work together again.

I came to this village because of Manaschï Kanïmbübü Abraïmova. She was a female Manaschï, and one on the list that the local employees of the TACIS<sup>27</sup> agricultural programme had drawn up for me. In Bishkek I had met Joost van der Ven, the Dutch head of the TACIS programme in Kyrgyzstan. He had brought me in contact with the local staff in Narïn, who had drawn up a list of all the Manaschïs they could find in Narïn oblast with the intention to take me to all of them, so that I could select one to stay with. We went to three villages, where the Manaschïs received me with anticipation and pride, and they all slaughtered a sheep for our company. The Manaschïs and their families ascribed me the role of esteemed scholar with high authority – a role I did not share and felt uncomfortable

---

<sup>26</sup> This interview was held in the fourth month of my research, when I was not aware of the different levels of 'tribe'. Unfortunately, I have not written down the Kyrgyz word that my translator translated to 'tribe'.

<sup>27</sup> TACIS is a development aid programme of the European Union that was launched in 1991. It stands for *Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of Independent States* and is aimed at 'enhancing the transition process' in the CIS countries.

with. I was twenty-five years old, did not speak Kyrgyz or Russian to any measure, and my intention was to live with a family and become as close as a family member – too many reasons why I could not or did not want to live up to the image people appeared to have of a foreign Manas scholar. The fourth village we went to seemed much more suitable for my purposes, and after our visit there we forgot about the rest of the list.

In Kazıbek, the TACIS people took me to the house of Keldibei<sup>28</sup>, where the Manaschi Kanımbübü came as a guest. I was told that she was too poor to house a guest, and if I chose to study her, I would live in the house of Keldibei. Keldibei was a well-off man. He was a teacher, and so was his wife and most of their ten children. Two sons still lived at home, two other sons and two daughters lived in the village with their families, two daughters and a son lived in Bishkek with their families, and one son had died one year ago. The people that lived in the house were Keldibei and his wife, their two youngest sons, the wife and two children of their youngest son, and the ninety-year old mother of Keldibei. In this household, life was hardest for the daughter-in-law. She was the *kelin*, a word that means both daughter-in-law and sister-in-law, but has a direct connotation of subordinate or serving household member. A Kyrgyz *kelin* is supposed to be obedient to her parents-in-law, and all of the older brothers and sisters of her husband. She cleans, cooks and serves dinner. She is the last one to eat, sits quietly at the end of the table and makes as little sound as possible. She wears a headscarf and has no say in daily matters, her task being to obey. Naturally, there are gradations between families in how much the young women are allowed to take up space and how much the women bend to their expected role, but most *kelins* I have met behaved as I described above.

Often, the young woman has been abducted by her husband and his male relatives. Many Kyrgyz women are literally taken off the streets and forced into the car of her future in-laws. They are taken to the house of her in-laws and forced to wear a headscarf – the symbolic expression of being married. Once the girl is married, her chances to ever get married again are reduced drastically. Therefore, most girls do not run away after the headscarf is put on. Sometimes the girl is raped to make sure that her chances of getting married again are diminished to almost zero (Kleinbach et.al., 2005:192). The parents of the girl usually come to claim their daughter back. However, they nearly always give up their claim, knowing they are too late and it would be too shameful for them and their daughter to take her home.

---

<sup>28</sup> With the exceptions of the Manaschis and their direct relatives, the names of my informants are pseudonyms.



During abduction, a large part of the behaviour of the various actors is show and playing out of expected behaviour. This makes it hard to make a first-hand appraisal of the true wishes of the people involved. A mix of individual desires and group interests make up the hidden agendas that lie underneath the outward actions and expressions. I witnessed a situation where a woman resisted fiercely to having a headscarf put on. After a long struggle with shouting and interference of everyone present, the mother of the groom-to-be decided they would give up as the girl clearly did not want the marriage. On our way back from the party, however, it became clear to me that the woman had wanted the marriage, but it was the mother who had disapproved of the marriage, and she had taken the opportunity to obstruct the marriage in a graceful way. For most girls, however, abduction is a very rough start of their life as *kelin*.

The position of a *kelin* changes when a younger *kelin* arrives in the family, or when she moves out of the house of her parents-in-law. The *kelin* of Keldibei's household (who had not been abducted) found her position too hard to keep and left to live in Bishkek with her baby girl. This was a disgrace that the family tried to keep away from me. The *kelin*'s behaviour was condemned by her in-laws who had no understanding for this. Her husband followed her a few months later to Bishkek, leaving his two-year old son in the village in the care of his parents. This seemed to settle matters a bit.

The family owned a large number of sheep, some chickens, a few cows and a horse that was used for transport. There was an *agarot* (a small plot of land used for gardening) and a hay field. The house was a four-chambered house (*tört-komnat üy*), that was well-furnished. The wooden floors were covered with *shirdaks*, felt carpets of bright colours and various designs. In the living room there was a stove, that was mostly fuelled with dried sheep's dung. Coal had become very expensive since the break-up of the Soviet Union, and this high in the mountains, wood was sparse. The living room furnished a sofa, a low coffee table to have tea at while sitting on the floor, and a wall unit with a television and a radio. The windows were sealed off with plastic against the cold, which made the room a closed-off but cosy place. The bedroom was given to me, where I spent many an hour sitting and waiting for time to pass. This room housed an interesting collection of Soviet-era Kyrgyz books on history and ethnography. The kitchen was very basic, with an oven and a small table. The guest room was the pride of my host family. There was a very long table with some twenty chairs, another sofa and a bookcase with encyclopaedias and a picture of Stalin. My host father was a fierce supporter of Stalin, as he had shown the world that the Soviet Union was a strong and fearsome nation. Stalin had frightened the

world and stood his own ground. When I asked him about the millions of people that were killed during his reign, he said: ‘These were not killed by Stalin himself! He could never have done that all alone. No, that was done by the people who killed each other.’

Around the house was a courtyard with a mobile washing table (in winter, this was placed inside), a dog house and around the back of the house an outhouse. There was a shed where food and utensils were stored. The meat of the two yaks that the family had slaughtered for winter supplies were stored there<sup>29</sup>. The family dog looked very scruffy and did not receive much attention at all. But when he suddenly died, I found Keldibei in tears. This show of affection surprised me, and I gave him the picture I had taken of the dog. This was a step too far, however, and caused hilarity among everyone, father not the least. Outside the fence, the family had a sheep pen and an area for the cows and horses to stay at night. In the day time they were all sent off with a shepherd who took the sheep and cattle of various families to grazing grounds.



*Figure 1.6 Slaughtering a yak*

---

<sup>29</sup> Once I found a strange-looking object there, that looked like a plumb with matches stuck into it. I asked the youngest son about it, who told me it was a cow's spleen and was put there to help cure his nephew from his ear aches.

Another sign of the wealth of this family was the second-hand car of the Soviet brand *Jiguli* that the second-youngest son acquired while I was there. His purchase was celebrated with the slaughter of a sheep. Relatives, friends and other villagers were invited to come and eat, and give their *bata* (blessings) in return.

My time with this family was not easy for me. We grew fond of one another, and whenever we met after a time of separation, there was a surge of affection. Day to day life was hard, however, as my presence caused a certain nervousness among my host family. There were secrets they wanted to hide from me, they had the burdensome role of good hosts to play, and they wanted to put their relationship with me to their best advantage in their social and economic life. For me, this meant that it became hard to go around the village and talk to people. My host family discouraged me to see many people with whom they had tense relations. One of these people, unfortunately, was the Manaschī I had come to the village for. In those first months, my Kyrgyz was not sufficient to defy their discouragements and do interviews on my own. My translator was a *kelin* to the family who lived on the other side of the village and tried to stay away from her parents-in-law's house for she would be made to do household chores. My days were filled with tea sessions with the family, reading the books in my room, an occasional outing to an historic site or a relation of the family they wanted me to meet, and a lot of waiting.

But even within the home, I hardly ever felt at home. The relationship between guest and host is intricate and very important in Kyrgyzstan. The largest duty lies with the host, who has to receive any guest knocking at his door. One day, for instance, Bishkek friends of mine were about to go out to a concert we had been looking forward to for days when guests arrived - a couple they knew from school. There was nothing we could do but stay at home and cook them a good dinner, and not mention the concert to the guests. Hosts are supposed to give enormous meals, often more than they have. Especially with official occasions, relatives are asked (and required) to help in collecting a mass of food. The first time I was at such a feast I made the mistake of asking what would happen with all the left-over food. This was an embarrassing question and was uneasily ignored. Kyrgyz people often say they are very happy to receive guests, as guests are holy. Guests are given all honours and the host will be humble and serving. The best food is for the guest, the honoured place (*tör*) for the most honoured guest. The *tör* is opposite the door, for in a yurta this is the warmest place. It is also the place where a guest can be kept in check, which might have been vital for survival in the time when the Kyrgyz were nomads. In the harsh countryside, unknown guests could not be left outside, but they could have

come with any intention. For Kyrgyz people, however, the obligation of guesting and hosting runs deeper than merely a social obligation. By treating a guest well, or throwing a feast, one fulfils a spiritual obligation that can ‘open one’s road’ and bring fortune and the spirits (*arbak*) on one’s side.

One particular misunderstanding makes guesting at a Kyrgyz house extra hard for Europeans. A Kyrgyz host will always urge his or her guests to eat. For me and many of my European and American friends, for whom being a good guest means eating a lot to show your appreciation of the food, this felt like food was forced down on us and we always left with stomachs far too full. Only in time I came to realise that a Kyrgyz guest will be reluctant to eat too much, for fear of burdening her host too heavily, or being seen as a hungry pauper. Encouragements of the host are needed to feel welcome enough to eat one’s fill.

With all these rules and expectations, being or having a guest for three months obviously creates a highly charged social situation. Despite all respect for guests, there is a Kyrgyz saying that goes:

<i>Birinchi kün – meiman</i>	The first day – a guest
<i>Ekinchi kün – tuugan</i>	The second day – family
<i>Üchüinchü kün – dushman</i>	The third day – an enemy

The next time I moved to a village, I made sure not to place that burden on myself or my hosts again. I divided my time in intervals of five days in the village and five days in my apartment Bishkek.

### 1.3.2 Törtkül

The second village in which I conducted fieldwork was Törtkül, a village at the south-side of Lake Issykköl, in the Tong rayon. During Soviet times, the north side of the lake housed the most popular bathing resorts, leaving the south side relatively underdeveloped and unspoiled. Törtkül is a village of two streets parallel to the main road that circles the lake, plus a number of cross-roads. For an outsider, it looks a lot like a village in Narin, with similar houses and roads, public buildings and water pumps. For the inhabitants, however, there is a world of difference. People from Kazıbek warned me that the people from the lake were alcoholics who drink home-brewn vodka named *samopan*. People from Törtkül asked me what I thought of those backward, ‘wild’ Kyrgyz from Narin who had only *shirdaks* as furniture. Meanwhile, *samopan* was drunk in Narin too, and *shirdaks* were equally important in Issykköl.



*Figure 1.7 Dowry in Törtküľ*

In Törtküľ, I lived with the Great Manaschĩ Kaba Atabekov and his wife Söken. Kaba-*ata*<sup>30</sup> was one of the three Great Manaschĩs in Kyrgyzstan at the time of my research, along with Shaabai Azizov, who passed away in 2004, and Seidene Moldokova. Kaba's important position, however, did not lend him any wealth. Compared to the family in Kazĩbek, Kaba-*ata* was less well-off. At the same time, he was less occupied with material wealth. As far as I experienced in the two Spring months I stayed there, there was no food shortage or other serious lack. Life was very quiet and peaceful at Kaba-*ata*'s homestead. Friends and neighbours came and went, in a less ritualised fashion than I had experienced in Kazĩbek.

<sup>30</sup> *Ata* means father and is added to his name as a sign of respect.



At the day of my arrival, the family had just returned from the return visit to the family of the new daughter-in-law they had kidnapped. When I first spoke to the girl, she told me how upset she was that she had to leave her old life and plans behind. She had a job and a fiancé in another town. A few weeks later, however, she and Kaba-*ata*'s son had grown very fond of each other. This made Söken-*apa* shake her head. 'It is normal if they fall in love after a year or two, but this is just too soon.' For the rest of the summer, they stayed and worked at the house of another son, who cultivated onions, potatoes, cabbage and wheat on the family's field.

Most of the time of my fieldwork at Kaba Atabekov's home we spent in the courtyard, looking at the chickens while we spoke about Manas or daily matters, sitting under the apricot trees in the orchard or having meals in the cosy kitchen of the small house. Kaba-*ata* and I had many enjoyable conversations, with simple jokes and basic intercultural fun. For instance, I once asked Kaba-*ata* why he did not have a *sakal*, the little beard that most elder Kyrgyz men have and that earns them respect. Kaba-*ata* looked at me and said: 'I am not a goat!'

### 1.3.3 Karakol

The last three months of my first stay in Kyrgyzstan, I lived in a rented apartment in Karakol, the district capital of İssikköl oblast. My main reason for staying here was to be near the Manaschı Talantaalı Bakchiev. Talantaalı, a young man of 27, lived in Kashka-suu micro-rayon<sup>31</sup> with his wife and two young children. Kashka-suu micro-rayon is on the Southern edge of town, right before the mountains. Its view on the mountains gives the run-down micro-rayon a charm that makes it a nice place to live, despite the broken stairs, the dusty roads, the smelly trash and noisy street dogs. The area is named after the small stream that tumbles down on the edge of the neighbourhood. The tap water comes directly from this stream, making it turbid with sand. To prepare the water for daily use one has to leave the water standing in jars and buckets for at least a day to allow the sand to sink to the bottom. Hot water, during Soviet times issued directly by the municipality through an extended hot water pipeline, had not been provided for a few years. Gas for cooking comes from gas cylinders, and electricity is, as anywhere else in Kyrgyzstan, very often (but not regularly) cut off for hours on end.

---

<sup>31</sup> A micro-rayon is a Soviet neighbourhood, composed of a number of apartment blocks. In most cities in the Soviet Union, the micro-rayons were named with numbers rather than proper names.



*Figure 1.8 Kaskha-suu microrayon in Karakol*

Kashka-suu has a small market and a post office where people collect their pensions and make their phone calls. The habit of sending letters had declined drastically, as people had lost their trust in the postal services. Most of the time, a fence in the middle of the dusty terrain is covered with *shirdaks* that people hang out to air. Social interaction between the households of Kashka-suu is frequent. People spend a lot of time chatting outside their porch and at the bus stop, and many help each other out by borrowing small things and doing chores for one other.

Karakol itself is a very pleasant middle-sized town. In the 1999 census, it had a population of 64,322, with a comparatively high number of ethnic Russians. Karakol's wide dust roads with little traffic are lined with many trees, which creates a calm and comfortable atmosphere. Connections with the Kumtor gold-mining company have kept

the town's *Tsum* (warehouse) intact and turned it into a comparatively luxurious shopping mall. The bazaar is a very busy and lively place where almost anything is sold. Karakol has a state university and virtually all other public facilities. It is connected to Bishkek by a 400 kilometres asphalted road. There are several ways of transport, all centred at the bus station. There is a regular bus service, but the bus station is also the departure point for private mini-buses and taxis. Taxis are usually driven by individual car-owners who go to Bishkek for their own business and pick up passengers to pay the petrol.

In this town, the Manaschī Talantaalī Bakchiev, generally addressed as Talantaalī, worked as a Kyrgyz language teacher at the state university. He felt he had little prospects for his career as a Manaschī and a Manas scholar, and in 1999 he moved to Bishkek with his family.

#### 1.3.4 Bishkek

Bishkek is Kyrgyzstan's capital and lies close to the Northern border with Kazakhstan. It was known as Frunze during Soviet times, but unlike other former place names, that name was not used anymore during my stay. Bishkek is a very pleasant city, not in the least because of the beautiful view on the mountains that tower over the South side of the city. The streets are broad and a system of small irrigation canals keeps the large trees that line the road alive. There are no old architectural monuments, but a number of Soviet edifices, such as the Opera house, the *Philharmonia* and the *Agroprom*<sup>32</sup> are pretty to look at. Until August 2003 an impressive statue of Lenin pointing the way forward to the masses stood in the central square. Inhabitants of Bishkek never expressed any positive or negative feelings towards this statue to me, and when it was taken down there were only a few protesters, mainly pensioners, in the square<sup>33</sup>.

Bishkek, with a population of 750,000 in the 1999 census, consists of a centre and many micro-rayons in the outskirts. The capital houses many different facilities, opportunities and life worlds. There are a number of bigger and smaller Central Asian markets, sterile Soviet-style shops, cosy corner shops, kiosk booths and recently western-style supermarkets have sprung up as well. Entertainment is found in many different places: there are museums, libraries, concert halls, cinemas, gambling places, fairgrounds,

---

<sup>32</sup> The Agroprom is the building of the Ministry of Agriculture

<sup>33</sup> According to photographer A. Shablovsky,

<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/culture/articles/eav082903.shtml>, last visited 01-02-2008



parks, swimming pools, and sport palaces. Street prostitution and begging are not absent either. The city houses many different universities, and a number of mosques and churches.



*Figure 1.7 Bishkek*

Bishkek can be reached by train, plane and over the road. Within Bishkek, means of transportation are the trolleybus and the regular bus, there is an extended privately run mini-bus system and many people who own private cars are taxi drivers. Walking is another popular way of transportation; bicycles, mopeds and motorcycles are rarely seen in central Bishkek.

I lived in Bishkek on several occasions. My first two months in Kyrgyzstan I spent in Bishkek to get acquainted with the country. My first contacts were with the Department of International Relations of the International University of Kyrgyzstan (IUK), who had helped me to obtain my visa. After two months I went to live in the village Kazıbek and came back to Bishkek after three months to go back and forth to the village Törtkül. At this time, I taught English classes at the IUK. By now, I had met American Peace Corps volunteers and foreign exchange students, and lived in a world of the non-wealthy ex-pats. When I came back to Kyrgyzstan in 1999, Bishkek was my permanent home base. My Manaschı friend Talantaalı had moved to Bishkek and lived in an *obshezhitie*, a house with very basic facilities, where many families had one small room, which they shared with

Siberian cockroaches. With the help of my network in the Netherlands we gathered money to buy them an apartment in the Tunguch micro-rayon at the West side of the city. I lived in an apartment in the city centre and often went to their house. I also met Talantaali at the American University in Kyrgyzstan, where he had found a job as a Kyrgyz language teacher. During this stay, I conducted interviews with officials in Bishkek and visited schools and universities. The last four months of my fieldwork, I shared an apartment with the linguist and German teacher Britta Korth. We often had guests from different social circles: ex-pats, Britta's students and our Kyrgyz and Russian friends.



*Figure 1.8 Manas in Bishkek*

During this last year in Bishkek, I often went out for trips to various parts of Kyrgyzstan. These were for conferences, field research, visits to friends, and elections observation. The places I visited were in familiar Narin and Issykköl, but also in Kyrgyzstan's southern oblasts Osh and Jalal-Abad. As I have explained in paragraph 1.3.3, I did not conduct fieldwork thorough enough in the South to include that area in this dissertation.

## 1.4 The story of Manas

Before I begin to speak of the social context of the Manas epic, let me introduce the reader to the basic story line of the tale. In this paragraph, I will give a resume of the story, at the risk of presenting an image of the Manas epic as if it was a fixed text.

Although the Manas is often treated as a fixed text, it clearly is not. Manaschīs are allowed, and indeed expected, to each have their own versions of the tale. Every single performance is an improvisation on the spot and consists of a new string of words and formulae. A Manaschī is supposed to recite the story as he or she receives it in dreams and visions, every version is thus highly personalised. The version of a Manaschī may be written down, but that does not make it the ‘true’ text – it is merely one single version of the Manas.

Although this is commonly known in Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyzstani scholars still refer to the Manas epic as if it was a fixed text. An example is I. Vladimirsky, who mentions the Manas epic in her article about Jews in Kyrgyzstan:

In Kyrgyz tradition, the term *dzeet* (Jew) is found for the first time in the Kyrgyz national epic poem *Manas*, which dates back to the 10th century CE and probably incorporates earlier traditions. *Manas* (...) is (...) the name of the legendary epic hero of the Kyrgyz people, described as a son of Jakup - Yaacov. *Manas* mentions several cities with sizeable Jewish communities (...) as well as (...) Jerusalem which is described as a "Holy City for Jews". An entire section of the poem is dedicated to “King Solomon's times” (Sulaimandyn Tushunda, in *Manas. Kyrgyz Heroic Epos*. Russian translation by A. Kuznetsov) (I. Vladimirsky<sup>34</sup>).

Even respected scholars in *Manas* studies themselves quote verses from the *Manas* without a reference, as if there was only one *Manas* text (Musaev, 1994: 162-165).

The idea of ‘the *Manas*’ could take hold because there is a general story line with a fixed set of characters and a number of events that occur in every version. *Manaschīs* too can say: ‘it is said in the *Manas*...’, which portrays the *Manas* as an entity separate of individual recitals<sup>35</sup>.

Topics that occur in complete versions of the *Manas* are the birth of *Manas*, his childhood, the gathering of his forty knights (*choro*), among whom his best friend the

---

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.bh.org.il/Communities/Archive/Kyrgyzstan.asp>, last visited 01-02-2008

<sup>35</sup> One might compare this to the story of King Arthur. This tale has a certain body that artists may tap into to create their own perspective and add their own embellishments. The intrigues between Lancelot and Guinevere may be described in many different ways, giving different personalities and motives to the characters involved, even the ending may vary from version to version, but Lancelot will remain King Arthur’s most beloved knight and Guinevere his wife.

Chinese (or Kalmak) Almambet, the recapture of the land of his ancestors, Manas' fight with Maiden Saikal, his marriage to Khanikei, K  k  t  i's funeral feast, the Great Campaign to Beijing and Manas' death. The epic is the first part of a trilogy, the second and third part tell tales about his son and grandson Semetei and Seitek. Not all Manasch  s recite stories from all three epics, some tellers narrate only about Manas, others only about Semetei. These reciters are called Semeteichi. A Great Manasch  , however, recites all these three epics, and often more. My informant Kaba Atabekov, for instance, knows the tale of Seitek's son Er-Sar  .

The Manas epic was translated into English for the 1995 'Manas 1,000' festival. Walter May, a British poet and translator of many poems from former Soviet Union countries, translated the version of Sag  mbai Orozbekov. The text he used was the Russian word for word translation published between 1984-1990 of a version written down between 1922-1926. At a lecture of Walter May at the International University of Kyrgyzstan that I attended, it was apparent that he did not master Kyrgyz or Russian. May explained that his wife, the poet Lyudmila Serostanova, was the link between him and the Russians<sup>36</sup>. This lecture led me to suspect that Serostanova had an important contribution in the translation process, although her name is not mentioned anywhere in the book. The three translators<sup>37</sup> who made a word for word translation to Russian in the 1984-1990 editions are mentioned.

In his translation, May remains true to the rhythm and rhyme of the epic. This inevitably leads to minor diversions from the original text. Furthermore, his transliterations of names are based on the Russian translation, where sounds particular to Kyrgyz have been substituted by Russian equivalents. The events, however, are unaltered, and I have based my description of Sag  mbai Orozbekov's version of the epic on May's translation. In chapter two, paragraph 2.4, I will contrast this version with a number of other written versions.

#### 1.4.1 Introduction to the plot

For the sake of accessibility to the plot for the reader unfamiliar with the Central Asian context, I will give a list of characters, a list of ethnonyms and a map to place the marches of Manas. It should be kept in mind, however, that the latter two are artificial means that suggest a world view based on maps and encyclopaedic knowledge that differs from the

---

<sup>36</sup> Noteworthy is his mention of the word 'Russian' to denote all people in the ex-Soviet Union.

<sup>37</sup> N. Kidash-Pokrovskaya, A. Mirbadaleva and S. Musaev.

world view that was the basis for this version of the epic. Maps were very likely not as central to the geographical image of Manaschī Sagimbai Orozbekov as they are to present-day Manaschīs. This does not mean that geographic descriptions cannot be accurate and that they cannot be placed on a map. Daniel Prior has proven that descriptions of relatively small-distance treks can be very accurate and can even be traced today (Prior, 1998). It merely means that the use of toponyms has come from a different geographic imagining.

In the case of ethnonyms, it is even clearer that the epic imagining differs considerably from encyclopaedic imagining. Almost every time that ethnonyms are used, it is not clear whether the Manaschī refers to a certain historic ethnic group, a present-day ethnic group, or a clan within another ethnic group. These categories are fluid and open for manifold interpretations. For the purpose of this introduction to the story of Manas, I will divide the ethnic groups that are mentioned into four categories: Turkic, Mongol, Chinese and Farsi groups.

### **List of Characters mentioned in the summary**

#### Manas' relatives and friends

Manas	Main hero, Kyrgyz khan
Nogoi	Grandfather of Manas
Jakip	Father of Manas
Chiyirdi	Mother of Manas
Bakdöölöt	Second wife of Jakip
Mendebai	Servant boy of Jakip
Karabörk	Manas' first wife
Akilai	Manas' second wife
Khanikey	Manas' third wife
Sanirabiyga	Khanikey's name before she marries Manas
Semetei	Manas' son with Khanikey
Khan Atemir	Father of Khanikey
Saikal	Opponent of Manas in battle game
Akbalta	Kyrgyz Elder and father of Chubak
Bakai	Cousin of Manas and his advisor
Koshoi	Kyrgyz hero
Kökötöi	Kyrgyz khan
Bokmurun	Son of Kökötöi and knight of Manas
Almambet	Manas' closest friend and knight
Chubak	Knight of Manas
Karatai	A.k.a Yrchy-uul, Singer and knight of Manas
Akkula	Manas' horse

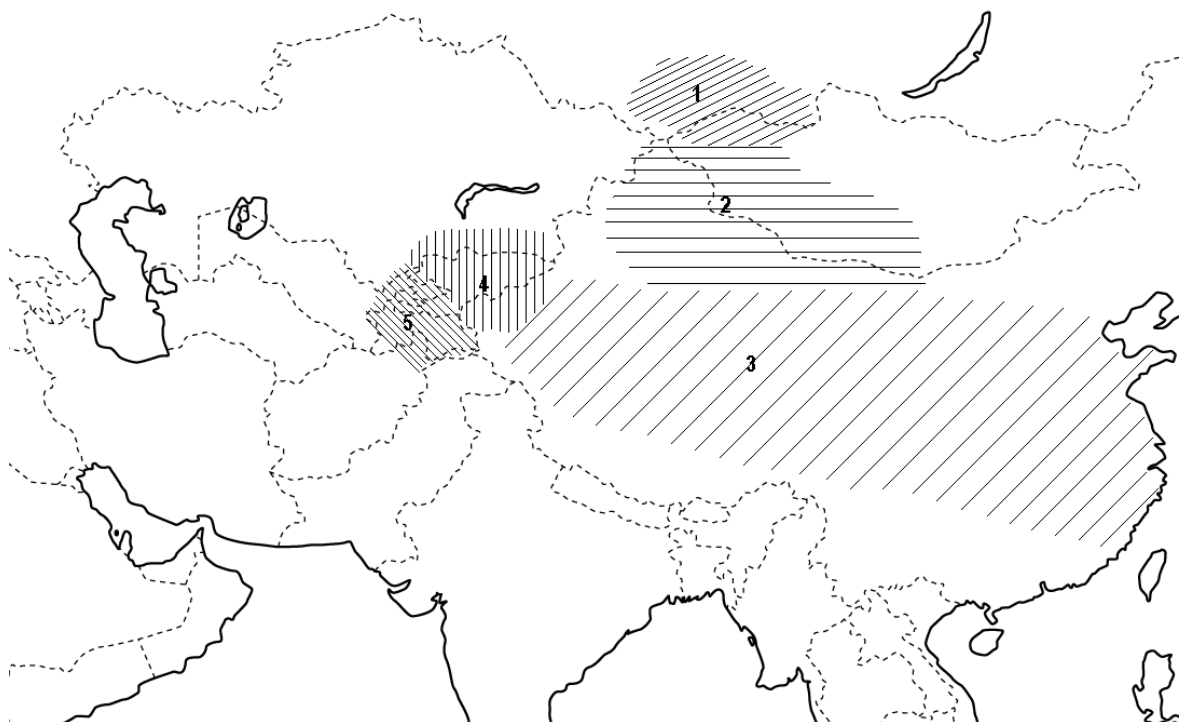
#### Manas' Enemies

Esen Khan	Kitai khan responsible for chasing Nogoi's offspring from their homeland
Neskara	Half-Kitai giant
Tekes Khan	Kalmak khan who lives in Naaman, Manas' ancestral land

Kuyas	Wizard of Tekes Khan
Orgo Khan	Kitai khan who lives in Chüy valley
Alooke	Kitai khan who lives in Andizhan
Kongurbai	Kitai khan, son of Alooke, becomes Manas' main enemy
Shooruk	Khan of a kindred tribe, father of Akilai
Joloi	Kalmak giant
Malgun	One-eyed giant

### List of Ethnonyms as used in Sagımbai Orozbekov's version

Kyrgyz	Turkic ethnic group of Manas
Nogoi	Clan name of Manas, and Turkic ethnic group separate of the Kyrgyz
Kazakh	Turkic ethnic group
Kipchak	Turkic ethnic group, at other times: clan within the Kyrgyz
Noigut	Turkic ethnic group, at other times: clan within the Kyrgyz
Türk	Umbrella term for various Turkic groups
Tajik	Farsi (Persian) group that lives in predominantly Turkic area
Kitai	Umbrella term for various Chinese groups
Kalmak	Mongol-speaking ethnic group of 17 <sup>th</sup> – 18 <sup>th</sup> century Jungarian empire, also known as Kalmik and Oirat



1: Altai

2: Kalmak area

3: Kitai area

4: Naaman

5: Tajik area

Map 3 Territories of Manas and his enemies

#### 1.4.2 Manas' Birth

The Kitai Esen Khan has attacked the realm of the rich man Nogoi, whose sons all fled in different directions. One of them is Jakip, a very wealthy man who now lives in the Altai region. At fifty he does not have a son, or even a daughter, to whom he can leave his wealth. His grief is enormous, as is that of his two wives, Chiyirdi and Bakdöölöt. One night all three have dreams of big birds of prey, which foretells good fortune. His wives try to persuade Jakip to throw a large feast to make the dreams come true and ensure they will have a son. First, however, Jakip has to find one of his servant boys who has gone lost when he was chasing one of Jakip's mares. When he finds Mendebai, the boy tells Jakip of a vision he saw when he was chasing the mare. Forty young men on horses gallop by and shout: "Jakip Bey" and "Manas!" They kill a tiger and befriend the boy Mendebai. Mendebai is convinced this is an omen that means Jakip will have a son, but Jakip finds it hard to believe. Back at the yurts, Jakip is finally persuaded to give a feast, and an extended description of the amount of animals slaughtered and guests invited follows.

When all guests have eaten and the poor have left, Jakip remains in the yurt with the elders whom he holds dear. He tells the elders of his dream and those of his wives, and asks the *ak-sakals* for their explanation. They tell him he has seen a wonderful dream, for he will have a son of great fame, a khan of renown.

And indeed, Jakip's first wife Chiyirdi falls pregnant. During her pregnancy, she has the unusual craving for tiger's heart, which she manages to obtain. The birth of Manas is a horror. The baby is ferocious, and all are afraid Chiyirdi is carrying a lion, a panther or a dragon. For seven days she struggles, while Jakip slays sheep, a cow, a camel and a mare, and calls in many sorceresses and witches. Another six days of labour pain goes by, and Jakip goes off into the mountains for he cannot bear the suspense. After another eight days, Umai-ene, the mythical mother of birth, comes by and urges the baby to come out. Finally the baby is born, and Chiyirdi goes into a fit when she hears it is indeed a boy. The boy is as big as a fourteen-year old, sits up straight, speaks, and when he is breastfed, he sucks so strongly that blood comes out of Chiyirdi's breasts.

Manas' birth is celebrated with a large feast, and guests from all ethnic groups are invited. Hundreds of animals are slaughtered, and for the winners of the horse and wrestling games, prizes are high in animals, robes and gold. During the feast, tension rises between the Türks and Kitai. Many Kitai flee, and the rest is beaten in a horse race. At the end of the feast, Jakip asks his guests to give a name to his son. A Dervish steps forward and proposes the name Manas, with the M for Mohammed, the N for Nabi (prophet), and



the S for the shape of a lion's tail. Everyone present agrees that this is a beautiful name, and the Dervish suddenly disappears out of sight.

#### 1.4.3 Manas' turbulent childhood

Seven years later, Manas has grown up to become a spoiled child, full of tricks and mischief. Gossip about his misconduct reach his father's ears, and Jakip decides to send his son to an old shepherd to learn some manners. Manas looks forward to a holiday in the pasture and when he sees his first wolf snatching one of the lambs, he attacks it with his bare hands. The wolf runs off, and when Manas follows it, he comes across a cave with forty horsemen. They turn out to be *Chilten*, benevolent spirits with strong powers. They tell Manas he will find forty comrades, fine men very well known by the *Chilten*. Manas behaves very badly in the pasture, almost killing an old Kalmak man for fun and slaughtering the lambs he is meant to guard. The old shepherd asks Jakip to take his son back. On their way back, Manas and Jakip get into a fight with six Kalmaks who have extorted Jakip for years. Manas kills their leader, thus arousing the fury of all six Kalmak tribes. This turns into a bloody war, but the Kalmak tribes turn against each other and the son of the dead Kalmak leader comes to ask for the aid of the Kyrgyz and other peoples who have united under Manas. Manas' army wins and the battle ends with a funeral feast for the dead.

When Manas is eleven years old, the Kitai leader Esen Khan in Beijing sends out a trade caravan with the task of finding this son of Jakip's, of whom his prophets have foretold he will attack Beijing one day. The caravan sets off, and after a long journey they bump into a group of horse herdsman. These are Manas and his friends, who are playing a game with sheep knuckles on the road. The caravan moves on and almost destroys the game ground. Manas is furious and kills the Kitai and Kalmak merchants. He releases ten Uighur servants. Manas' friends and relatives are worried at his aggression, but are delighted when they see the spoil of forty-five camel loads. The elder Akbalta calms their fears by saying that Beijing is too far away for Esen Khan to take revenge, and there is no need to subject to him.

Manas' next adventure is his struggle with the giant half-Kitai Neskara. Neskara is an evil man who is ordered around by fifty invisible demons. He is warned by his horse that a young Nogoi by the name of Manas is after his head, and that he should capture and kill him before it is too late. Neskara gathers his six thousand labourers, mostly Kitai, and seeks out Manas. By now, Manas has gathered his forty knights (*choro*) and rides his



wonder-horse Akkula. Many other warriors from different tribes and ethnic groups come to aid Manas and together they defeat Neskara's army. Manas severely wounds Neskara, but he manages to escape. Manas sets the five thousands captives free, gaining deep respect from them. After this fight, many tribes and ethnic groups plead their allegiance to Manas and a large number of people come to live near Jakip's settlement in Altai.

Half a year later, the young Manas is gone missing again. His father and mother are worried deeply, and when they hear that the enemies are after him, they propose the elders to buy another man's son with sheep and give him up to the enemy as Manas. Jakip's older brother is deeply shocked and very angry with Jakip and Chiyirdi that they can even propose such an idea. Meanwhile, Manas has encountered a horrible lamb-eating monster, that he shoots with his gun Akkelte. A little later, eleven men from Kitai have come to search out Manas to capture him and show him some respect for their Emperor. Manas becomes furious, beats them all up and pokes out an eye, cuts off an ear and slices off the noses of each of the eleven men.

#### 1.4.4 Manas becomes Khan

One day, Manas sets off with eighty-four youngsters to go out and hunt. During this trip, the young ones challenge him to slaughter his horse Akkula to feed them. Manas hates the idea of killing his beloved horse, but agrees that he must feed them. This assures the youngsters that Manas will be a good Khan, and while they proclaim him as their Khan, they slaughter another horse. Manas then asks them to follow him into war past the Orkun river. Here they encounter an army of Esen Khan, sent out to revenge the loss of his forty-five camels. Manas and his followers slay seven hundred of the nine hundred soldiers and divide the spoil. By now, all the Kitai and Kalmaks have become the foes of Manas and his allies. Jakip refers to them as heathens and their godlessness becomes a reason to crush them altogether. He claims the gathered Türk tribes need a Khan, and in the end, Manas is chosen by all to be their Khan in battle. This is celebrated with a large feast.

#### 1.4.5 Manas fights and falls in love

The original publication of Sagimbai Orozbekov's version now moves on to part 2. The English version starts off with the short mention that Manas has married Karabörk. A footnote explains that the story of how Manas won her is not included in this text. We can find this in the Kyrgyz text, however, that tells how the spoiled Khan's daughter Karabörk refuses to marry Manas because she thinks he has murdered her father. She fights Manas

with a bow, hurting his esteemed advisor Bakai in the process. When she finds out her father is still alive, Karabörk gives in to her feelings for Manas and marries him.

A number of years later, war begins. Jakip orders a festive meeting where Manas explains that in order to defeat the Chinese, they will have to fight back. He proclaims his intention to win back Naaman, their ancestral land, and persuades Kyrgyz, Kipchak, Kazakh, Nogoi, Noigut and Kalmak leaders to fight with him. Their enemy is the Kalmak Tekes Khan who resides in Naaman. His wizard Kuyas has created a magic army by turning reeds into an enormous army of invincible footmen. When Manas and his army of six hundred thousand arrives, they are heavily intimidated by Tekes Khan's magic army – with the exception of Manas, who is furious that his followers are such cowards. Wise Bakai finds out that the army is not real, and merely mirrors the actions of a challenger. Attack them, and they attack you. Shout at them, and they shout the very same thing back. They make a big fire and the magic army is burnt to ashes. Tekes Khan stabs his wizard to death in a flare of anger, and he stabs himself in a flare of panic when he is faced with Manas' army. The fight is over, and Manas is disappointed in Tekes as a Khan. He decides to spare the Kalmaks and urges them to select another Khan. A young man is selected, and this is celebrated with a large feast.

At this feast, the maiden Saikal challenges everyone for a wrestling match on horseback. Saikal has a reputation and no-one dares to take the challenge. Finally, Manas steps up, shamed that he has to fight a woman to save the pride of his army. Manas falls for her beauty instantly. A fierce battle follows, but Manas cannot beat her. Everyone around urge them to give up, and Manas is offered a prize to accept his victory and not kill her. The only prize that Manas would accept, however, is the maiden Saikal as a bride. But Saikal disappears and does not show herself to Manas anymore.

During the feast, Jakip and many others arrive, and together they go forth to the Tien Shan range. The Kitai Orgo Khan, who resided in the Chüy valley, has ordered all chiefs and Khans of the Tien Shan area to bring their armies. A terrible battle leads to thousands of deaths on both sides. Orgo Khan is killed too. The next day, his wife comes to Manas and offers him gifts and her life, if only he spares the lives of her two sons. Manas lets her live in her own city, but asks to have her son Karatai as a poet<sup>38</sup>. Her other son also becomes one of Manas' knights. Many more fights in other parts of Tien Shan follow and all are won by Manas and his army.

---

<sup>38</sup> This Karatai is the famous Țrchī-uul, the poet who sang Manas' mourning song. Legend says that this song was the beginning of the Manas epic. See paragraph 2.1.

Manas and his people then move on to Andizhan, Manas' true ancestral land. Here the strong and wealthy Kitai Khan Alooke rules. When Manas seeks him out, he rides through Alooke's magnificent garden with a collection of the most exotic animals. Manas is now thirty-two years old and looks most impressive. Alooke is intimidated by his presence, and decides not to fight Manas. He tries to lure him to his lions, but the lions too are too scared of Manas to attack. Alooke then asks Manas if he can leave in peace. Manas agrees, if Alooke gives him his eldest son as a knight. Over the time-span of one year, all Kalmaks and Kitai leave Andizhan peacefully.

Another enemy, however, is on his way. Shooruk, the leader of a kindred tribe that herds camels, is annoyed by the Kyrgyz presence so near. He attacks a few settlements at the edge of the Andizhan and Alai area. Manas' followers are shocked and blame Manas for taking them from their safe and pleasant Altai pastures to come to this hostile area. Manas then single-handedly kills the strongest men of Shooruk, which prompts the other Kyrgyz to fight with him and defeat Shooruk's army. Shooruk sees his mistake and begs his daughter to marry Manas in order to restore peace<sup>39</sup>. Along with his daughter, Shooruk has offered thirty maidens up for marriage to the Kara-Kyrgyz. The men gather around, and make the women pick their husbands. The girls are all excited and don't know who to choose. Shooruk's daughter Akilai gets the first pick, and she chooses Manas. All other thirty women and men are just as happy, and this is celebrated with a one-week feast.

Meanwhile in Andizhan, Alooke's son Kongurbai has returned from his five-year stay in Beijing. He is eighteen years old, and despises his father for having given up Naaman to Manas without dying. Alooke angrily tell his son Manas is indefeasible, and he leaves for Beijing.

#### 1.4.6 Manas meets his closest friend Almambet

Manas throws another large feast, but no-one understands why. After all the eating and games, Manas tells his elder guests of a dream he had, and asks for their explanation. They tell him a Kitai, Almambet, is on his way to join Manas, stand by his side and become his best friend. Manas' heart beats faster with anticipation, and he rewards the dream-teller with his own fabulous robe. What they know about Almambet is that he has left his own people to live amongst the Kazakh. The Kazakh have treated him very badly, however.

---

<sup>39</sup> Here, in the middle of a verse, the first book of the English translation ends. This is picked up without introduction in the second book.

Now that peace has returned, Manas and his forty *choro* have little to do. They take off on a long hunt, and finally come to a beautiful place that the Kalmak called Kötölök. They rename the place Talas and make it Manas' land. This where Manas encounters Almambet. There is an immediate connection between the two. Manas offers Almambet his own steed Akkula, his armour, sword and gun, and tells him he can leave with this presents if he wants to, or stay with Manas and his knights. Almambet feels he is finally welcome and appreciated, and decides to stay. All rejoice that Manas has found his comrade. When they arrive back at Manas' parents' dwelling, they receive him like he was their own son, with tears in their eyes. Chiyirdi, who is a very old lady now, feels her breasts rise, and milk comes out for Almambet. She breast-feeds Manas and Almambet, who thus become milk brothers<sup>40</sup>. An enormous feast is held. When the horse races begin, Almambet returns Akkula to Manas and chooses Sarala for a horse in stead. Manas comes in second, after Kōkōtōi, and Almambet is fourth.

#### 1.4.7 Manas marries Khanikey

Manas is now in his thirties. Although he has two wives, he hardly spends any time with them. He asks his father to find him a good match, and Jakip sets off with three of Manas' knights towards Tajik area. After a long search he sees the girl Sanirabiyga, who is just perfect in every respect. He goes to the court of Khan Atemir, who is also referred to as Shah, to ask who her father is and if he can take her home to his son. At court, he is treated with contempt by the guards and sent away. Once it becomes known he is the father of Manas, no-one dares to oppose him anymore. The girl turns out to be the daughter of Khan Atemir himself, but the Khan would rather fight the invincible Kyrgyz than give his daughter to Manas. His advisors want to solve this with diplomacy and propose to ask a bride price that Manas can never afford or even find. However, when Jakip comes home and names the bride price, all Kara-Kyrgyz aid Manas in gathering the high numbers of rare live stock.

The enormous herd sets off and arrives in Atemir's city. Khan Atemir is shocked that Jakip has returned with the bride price and the groom, and ignores them. This angers Manas to the point that he wishes to see the girl, and if she is no good, he'll kill her in a gruesome way. He finds her asleep, and when she wakes up she scolds him and puts him in place. Manas is angry and says that if she does not want him, he will kill her. Sanirabiyga

---

<sup>40</sup> People who have been nurtured by the same mother become milk siblings. This is a holy connection, with many rules and taboos attached.



days after Kökötöi's death the funeral begins. Manas and his knights have arrived and put up their yurtas. All guests are fed well with mutton, camel and horse meat. The funeral starts with wailing and singing songs of lament. Prayers to Allah are read and Kökötöi is buried together with his horse. After this, the horse races start. Poets sing songs about Kökötöi and are rewarded by Bokmurun with robes. Forty thousand mullahs read from the Koran, and then there are more races. At the funeral, a large part of Kökötöi's enormous wealth is divided and everyone is urged not to sell anything, so that the wealth will only increase.

Three years later, it is time for the *ash*, the memorial feast. The chosen location for the feast is at Lake İssikköl. The feast is enormous. Bokmurun has travelled enormous distances to invite friends, foes, and non-human mythical creatures. On Manas' advice, the invitations come with a threat of war for those who do not show up. And the guests indeed arrive in thousands. Manas and his knights are the last ones to arrive, a month late, and their entrance makes a big impression on the crowd.

Trouble starts when the Kalmak giant Joloi does not feel he is fed well. He challenges everyone around him, and goes off to steal the meat that is still being prepared. Bokmurun sends Joloi away, and Joloi goes to the Kitai enemies of the Kyrgyz to complain. He proposes Kongurbai to seize Bokmurun's wonderful horse, Maaniker. Kongurbai is very interested in the idea and orders Bokmurun to come to his tent. There he scolds Bokmurun for having forced them to the feast, not feeding them well and making them wait for a month. He demands to be presented Maaniker, as Manas was also presented with a war horse as soon as he arrived. If he does not get the horse, he threatens to attack the Kyrgyz right there. Bokmurun, who loves his horse very much, tells Joloi he needs to confer with his elders. Wise Koshoi advises to give up Maaniker for peace's sake, but then he realises they should discuss this with Manas. Manas becomes furious and scorns Koshoi for his advice. He rides off to Kongurbai immediately, followed by his forty knights. In the midst of battle, Kongurbai cowardly gives up his claim on Maaniker, and presents Manas with a horse of his own in stead. Kongurbai then flees with his own horse Algara.

The next day, the feast starts with horse races. Manas' horse Akkula is too fat, however, and Manas asks Almambet to magically conjure up rain, as this will win Manas a day to train Akkula. Almambet succeeds in making rain and the next day, Akkula is ready for the race. By now, the other horses are too thin now and the contestants are disgruntled

by this cheating. It is decided that the horses are sent off with sixty drivers who are trusted by everyone.

The horse race lasts a number of days, and the people are getting bored of waiting. To provide entertainment, Manas comes up with his forty knights, who are actually eighty-four in number. He divides them in four groups of twenty-one and makes them fight each other. The crowd does not understand why Manas lets his knights slay each other, but when they realise no-one gets hurt, they enjoy watching the skill of fighting without causing injury. Then Khan Koshoi asks the heathens to come up with their best wrestler. They put forward the Kalmak Joloi, the giant who caused trouble before. None of the Muslim fighters dares to stand up to Joloi. Koshoi asks all of them, but not even Manas dares to take the challenge. He claims that although he is a good fighter on horseback, he is too weak for Joloi on the ground. Manas then proposes Koshoi to fight Joloi himself. Koshoi is in his eighties and feels far too old to fight the giant, but he is so shamed by the refusal of all Muslims to fight that he takes the challenge, even though it may cost him his life.

Koshoi needs a pair of good trousers to fight. His own trousers are too weak and may burst, putting him to great shame. He tries on a number of trousers, but he does not fit into any of them and blames the women who made them. Then Manas says that his wife Khanikey has made a few very good trousers. Koshoi tries a pair on, but when they do not fit, Manas is deeply humiliated and fears he has to send Khanikey back to her parents. Khanikey, however, had already made another pair of trousers especially for Koshoi. She had done this because she is childless and hoped for Koshoi's blessings in return for a good pair of trousers. His *bata* (blessings) would hopefully help her to finally conceive. The trousers fit Koshoi perfectly, and he gives very strong blessings, asking God to give Khanikey a son named Semetei who will defeat Kongurbai. Koshoi regains his self-confidence and the wrestling match goes on for a day and a night. In the end it is the old Khan Koshoi who wins.

Meanwhile, Kongurbai has come back with his horse Algara and challenges Manas to fight him with a spear on horse back. Manas takes the challenge, but the best horses are all in the race. After a long search, he finds a good horse and manages to knock Kongurbai down in a fierce battle. All the guests then go to their yurts and have a good meal. The next day, the horses are due back from the race. Kongurbai and Joloi, angry about all their losses, they try to stop the Kyrgyz horses. Manas' horse Akkula is attacked by Kongurbai, but Manas and Almambet come to his rescue. Akkula wins the race, Joloi's

horse comes in third. Now the Kalmaks and Kitais are all annoyed, and at night they kill sixty Kyrgyz and run off with the cattle of the first prize. Bokmurun, Manas and the forty knights follow them and confront Kongurbai and Joloi. These are wounded, and the Kyrgyz return with their cattle.

This is where the English translation by Walter May ends, as the fourth volume of Sagımbai's Russian translation was not available to him yet. However, the Manas scholar K.A. Rakhmatullin used an older publication of Sagımbai's Manas for a comparison of versions (Rakhmatullin translated in Aliev et.al, 1995:294-330). The final episodes of Sagımbai Orozbekov's version of the Manas epic are quoted from his work. The translation of Rakhmatullin's text from Russian to English stems from a publication of the most authoritative articles in Manas studies in Russian and English for the 'Manas 1,000' festival.

#### 1.4.9 The Great Campaign

(...) six Kyrgyz khans decided to come out against Manas and punish him. The khans did not like Manas' behaviour at the funeral feast to honour K  k  t  y's death. They accused Manas of being too self-confident and of giving orders without consulting them. (...) The rebellious khans dispatched to Manas six messengers with the [sic] letter demanding that the khans and their numerous escorts should be received by Manas with high honours and a sumptuous feast should be held to please them. The conspirators reckoned that their impudent demand would infuriate Manas and provoke an armed conflict with Manas, which would offer them the chance to do away with their opponent. The rebellious khan's messengers were given an exclusively warm reception. Manas held a sumptuous feast in their honour thus manifesting his wealth and might. After the feast, Manas gave expensive presents to the messengers and let them go. They carried Manas' letter to their khans. In his letter, Manas ordered the khans to come immediately to him with all their warriors, and he threatened to kill them, if they disobeyed their order. The conspirators, frightened of Manas' anger, hurried to his headquarters as they were ordered. (...) Manas forgave the conspirators and offered them a chance to take part in in the military march to Beijing. The six khans accepted Manas' offer. The Kyrgyz army gets ready for the March. Bakai is elected the commander of the joint Kyrgyz forces. Almambet, a Chinese by birth, becomes the army's guide, as



he knows the way to Beijing. Manas declares that those not willing to participate in the march may stay at home. Having heard this declaration, the greater part of the warriors are going to leave Manas for home. Then Manas appears before the troops, and all the warriors, impressed by his extraordinary might, show unbounded enthusiasm for the forthcoming march. Manas presents each combatant with a battle horse. Each Kyrgyz family killed the [sic] sheep and cattle to cook meat for the army. The warriors say good-bye to their wives and children, their parents and relatives, and the Kyrgyz army sets out for Beijing.

Manas, escorted by the forty combatants of his body-guard, takes leave of his wife, Khanikei, who warmly receives her husband and his men treated them to plenty of delicious food and wine. Then Khanikei presents her guests with expensive armour and harness. Khanikei inquires about her husband's possible return and expresses her profound grief caused by her childlessness. Manas consoles his beloved wife (Rakhmatullin, 1995:299-300).

Rakhmatullin describes in detail how Orozbekov tells of the march towards Beijing.

Almambet is annoyed by the lack of discipline in the army and restores order. But then, he gets into a fight himself with Chubak, another of Manas' knights. Manas manages to reconcile them. Finding the way is not easy, as the Chinese use magic to defend their borders. The party also bumps into the one-eyed giant Malgun, who is killed by Chubak and Almambet. Using tricks and magic, the Kyrgyz ride further into China. Here they meet Kongurbai, the son of former enemy Alookey. A fierce battle unfolds, and Rakhmatullin goes on:

Soon the Kyrgyz warriors put their opponents to flight. Manas chases Kongurbai all the way to Beijing. The Chinese are horrified by the might of the Kyrgyz army and beg for mercy. The victors are given expensive presents. Then the victorious Kyrgyz army sets out for Talas (ibid.:301).

#### 1.4.10 Manas' death

(...) Manas, who is almost all his life childless, complains of his destiny and wants to go to Mecca to ask Allah to give him a child. Just at that moment, Kanykei brings her husband the joyful news of her being pregnant. (...) the birth of Semetei is celebrated with a sumptuous feast. Soon Manas goes on a pilgrimage to Mecca to thank Allah for giving him Semetei, the successor to his heroic deeds. While Manas is absent, the Chinese sovereign, Kongurbai, attacks the Kyrgyz. Allah helps Manas

to come back home from Mecca just in time to meet Kongurbai and his warriors. In the fierce fight, Manas perishes. Almambet, Chubak, Syrgak as well as other combatants of Manas' body-guard are also killed in the battle. Kanykei mourns for her husband and his companions-in-arms. Manas is buried in his native Talas. The Kyrgyz build a mausoleum. The funeral-feast is held to honour Manas' death. This is how ends the Kyrgyz epic poem "Manas" in the narrator Orozbekov's version (ibid.:301-302).



## Chapter two    The Oral Performance of the Manas Epic

The Manas epic is essentially an oral epic. Oral performance is the form in which it was conceived, and although new forms of telling the tale have entered the scene, the recital by oral poets is still regarded as the most authentic form of expression.

Tales of the hero Manas were probably created at a time when very few performers and audiences were literate<sup>42</sup>. Oral poetry was, as far as we know, the most important form of entertainment among the mountain nomads. According to Wilhelm Radloff, the first European to record Manas poems and provide an analysis of its nineteenth-century social context, the Kyrgyz<sup>43</sup> thoroughly enjoyed language. They had admirable language skills, and even their daily speech sounded like poetry. Oral performers visibly loved to speak, and the audience delighted in a well-told tale (Radloff, 1885:III). With the advance of literacy and new art forms such as painting, theatre and cinema, the tales of Manas were expressed in new ways. Artists who work with these new forms, however, do not forget that the origin of the Manas lies in its oral transmission.

It is therefore only appropriate to start with an analysis of the oral performance of the Manas epic. This chapter will discuss the lives and performances of Manas narrators in different times. I will describe who becomes a Manaschī, how they become a Manaschī, how they learn to recite and what their social status is. I will elaborate on their role as intermediaries between humans and the supernatural. I will then explain how audiences find access to the oral performance of the Manas epic, and all of this will be placed into the perspective of three time periods: before, during and after the times of the Soviet Union. But let me start by describing a performance that I attended.

It is January 25, 1997. I am in a class room of the International University of Kyrgyzstan. The room is decorated with two panels of paintings featuring Manas, yurtas (*boz-üylör*), people in traditional clothes, horses and mountains. The panels have been brought in especially for a Manas conference organised by the university and the

---

<sup>42</sup> It is possible that the epic originates from the time when the Kyrgyz used a runic script (see chapter one, paragraph 1.1.2.1)

<sup>43</sup> Radloff speaks of ‘*alle Kirgisen, sowohl die Kasak-Kirgisen, wie auch die Kara-Kirgisen*’ (Radloff, 1885:III). The Kasak-Kirgisen are presently known as Kazakh, the Kara-Kirgisen as Kyrgyz.

Ministry of Education. The conference is to be held in two parts: today, students will give presentations on the Manas epic, and tomorrow, Manas scholars will convene.

Eleven students, a Manaschī, three teachers, two American exchange students and me are in the room. We sit in a square behind tables. The teacher introduces the young man in the room and tells us he is a Manaschī. His name is Talantaalī Bakchiev, he is from Karakol, and not only does he recite the Manas, he also researches it and writes about it in prose (*kara-söz*). Talantaalī looks young, somewhere in his twenties. He gets up and sits down on a chair in front of the class. He tells us that he is Sayakbai Karalaev's grandson, and adds that he himself has written a book in verse about Almambet. He explains what it takes to be a Manaschī. He then takes off his glasses and his watch and starts his recital.

Talantaalī introduces the episode he will recite for us in prose. He will tell us about Semetei, the son of Manas, he says, and he gives some background information leading up to the event he will narrate about. He then begins with a long 'eeeeee-hee!' A cadence sets in with melodies that have become familiar to me already (see figure 2.1). Lines of seven syllables, or lines brought into a seven-syllable rhythm form the basis of his song. The Manaschī frequently uses alliteration and end-rhyme. I understand a few words here and there, but the verbs at the end of the sentences are often unfamiliar to me. The chanted lines are alternated with common speech, apparently when the Manaschī moves from one scene or atmosphere to the next. The speech is not entirely common, however, it goes exceedingly fast and drops to a lower pitch, as if he is rattling off the sentence. Frequent exclamations of 'eeee!' and 'aaaaa!' intersperse the narration.

This Manaschī recites in an unusual slow, dark voice. As the tale progresses, the pace speeds up, and becomes very powerful. As with other Manas performances, I once again feel goose bumps on my skin. I observe a man in the middle of a creative process, who seems to use his intelligence, all the ranges of his voice and his entire body to bring across a tale he cares deeply about. When I look at his eyes, I do not see any signs of a trance or another form of surrender to a creative force. In later situations, I will see Talantaalī in a more meditative state, but in this class room, he actively uses narrating methods to entice the audience.

The audience is enticed, although not entirely. A certain distance remains, although the students, teachers and foreigners are listening with concentration. After some fifteen minutes, the Manaschī ends his recital and wipes the sweat off his face. The audience gives him a warm applause. Talantaalī puts his glasses and watch back on and starts his scholarly presentation on Sayakbai Karalaev, Buddhist elements in the Manas epic and

a novel based on the Manas that was published in 1995. His presentation is followed by six other presentations from the students in the room.

*Figure 2.1 Samples of melodies used repetitively in random order*

Kaba Atabekov



Talantaali Bakchiev



## 2.1 Who are Manaschis?

There are few written records about Manaschis in the period before the Soviet Union. Early collectors such as Wilhelm Radloff and Chokan Valikhanov have left valuable notes on narrators of the Manas epic, but they do not provide information on the lives and arts of individuals. Although Radloff had a high opinion of the skill and eloquence of (most of) the narrators he encountered, he did not feel the necessity to identify the narrators whose versions he wrote down by name. This omission was probably due to Radloff's adherence to the idea that at the time of his recordings, the Kyrgyz were in the 'true epic period' and had not yet come to the level of 'individualised culture' (Radloff, 1885:III). Therefore, individual artist-ship had no place like it has in further developed, or literate, societies. Interestingly, Radloff did notice that the narrators themselves were dedicated to displaying their personal talents and skills (ibid.:XVII). Thus, Radloff's idea of an oral tradition where the individual artist did not matter is contradicted by his own observations. To learn more about the individuals who created and developed the Manas epic, we have to rely on present-day oral sources and on the works of Soviet Manas scholars who have gathered tales and legends of old Manaschis.

During my fieldwork, I was told on a number of occasions that the Manas epic started off as just one song: the mourning song (*koshok*) that Manas' singer Īrchī-uul composed after Manas' death. This song was passed on to next generations, and built upon by other singers, until it reached the size that it has today. Īrchī-uul was one of Manas' forty knights (*choro*). His original name was Karatai, but he was nicknamed Singer Son (*Īrchī-uul*) as his father was the singer Īraman Īrchī. Īrchī-uul is described in the epic verses of Sagımbai Orozbekov as 'from the Steppe' and 'a Kazakh from the Great Horde' (Manas Entsiklopediasy II:358)<sup>44</sup>.

However, there is debate amongst Manas scholars as to who indeed was the first Manaschī. The Kazakh writer and scholar Muhtar Auezov, highly respected in Manas circles, started this debate by claiming that the first song about Manas was not sung by Īrchī-uul, but most probably by Jaisang-īrchī, another knight of Manas who had joined him in the Great Campaign (*Chong Kazat*) (Auezov translated in Aliev et.al., 1995:375, Manas Entsiklopediasy I:194). Auezov argues that the first song of the Manas epic was the tale of this campaign, and claims that it has been proven to be created by a poet-warrior who had taken part in the campaign (Auezov translated in Aliev et.al., 1995:375,376). In the Great Campaign, Manas and his knights go to the city Bejin with intent to defeat the Kitai Khan. Auezov argues that the episode of the Great Campaign is an epic reflection of the events of 840 AD, when the Kyrgyz seized the Uygur capital Bei-Tin (ibid.)<sup>45</sup>. With this, Auezov dates the origins of the epic back to the ninth to tenth century AD.

S. Aliev, the author of the section on Jaisang in the Manas Encyclopaedia does not seem to agree with the association of Jaisang-īrchī as the first Manaschī, or with the subsequent dating of the origins of the Manas. In contrast, he commences the section with:

*Jaisang Īrchī – Manaschī. On the history of J.Ī. there is no information. 14-18<sup>th</sup> c.*

(ME I:194, my translation).

Unwilling to open a frontal attack on Auezov's ideas, Aliev carefully makes use of words like 'hypothesis' and 'maybe' to express his doubt on the idea that Jaisang-īrchī was the first Manaschī:

In the field of Manas studies the question of who was the first Manaschī was raised by the scholar M.Auezov, who gave his own hypothesis about it. He said that this

<sup>44</sup> The Manas Encyclopaedia was published for the Manas 1,000 festival in 1995. It consists of two volumes of over 400 well-illustrated pages each and is written in Kyrgyz. The compilers are Kyrgyzstan's leading Manas scholars, who have managed to produce a thorough and extensive overview of the present knowledge on the Manas epic. They began their work on the Encyclopaedia in 1991.

<sup>45</sup> See chapter one, paragraph 1.1.2.1. Originally this interpretation was proposed by A.N. Bernshtam (Prior, 2000:30-31).

poet, who is remembered in the version of Sagımbai Orozbek Uulu as 'Just about the interior of a dwelling he could sing for half a day', may have created the first songs of 'Manas' (ibid.).

Aliev explains that the name Jaisang must have come from a Chinese title for nobility that was taken over by the Mongols and Oirots in the fourteenth and fifteenth century and later by the Kyrgyz. A third candidate for the title of first Manaschı is Toktogul ırchı, advanced by Manas scholar S. Musaev:

(A)ll the weeping songs were collected by Toktogul, a legendary singer, who lived 500 years ago and who created the epos 'Manas' (Musaev, 1994:115).

The above discussion among Manas scholars is entirely hypothetical and based on a combination of highly contestable assumptions. The lack of 'hard' historic data has created conflicts for the Manas scholars, as the fund of orally transmitted knowledge with which they were raised does not meet the requirements of the positivist academic tradition in which they were educated. This has given rise to interesting combinations of the two types of knowledge. For instance, the wish to date Toktogul's life exactly comes from the academic world, but the means to do so come from oral genealogy (*sanjıra*), passed on traditionally by specialists named *sanjırachı*. The discussion of who was the first Manaschı was the basis for the calculation of the 1,000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the epic. However, everyone in Kyrgyzstan was aware that this was rather a convenient number for a celebration than an exact dating of the epic. The fact that preparations had been made for the celebration of the 1,000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the epic in 1940, and even for the 1,100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1945, added to their scepticism. Still, the number came to lead a life of its own, and nowadays journalists and tourist guides have no reservations in stating that the Manas epic is 1,000 years old.

An important addition to the discussion on who was the first Manaschı is the fact that the early Manas tellers were likely not known as Manaschı in their days. In the Yudakhin's Kyrgyz-Russian Dictionary, the following is said about the word Manaschı:

**Manaschı** Performer of the Manas epic (the term appeared after the revolution, in earlier days, narrators of 'Manas' like other narrators of heroic epics, were called **jomokchu**) (Yudakhin, 1965:515, my translation).

Musaev, the author of the section on Manaschı contained in the Manas Encyclopaedia, agrees that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, *jomokchu* (from *jomok*, tale) was the word commonly used for Manas tellers. He names Balık and Tinıbek as examples. Musaev explains that the first time the word Manaschı was used in scholarly circles was in



the newspaper Red Kyrgyzstan (*Kızıl Kyrgyzstan*) of May 27, 1930. In an article about Sagımbai Orozbekov, the Great Manaschı of that time, the author H. Karasaev used the words *ırchı*, *akın* and *Manaschı* (ME II:69). Musaev suggests that the word Manaschı may have arisen among the Kyrgyz when there was an increase in people who specialised in telling the Manas (ibid.).

*Table 2.1 Manaschıs named in this study*

Legendary Manaschıs	İrchı-uul / Jaisang-ırchı (First Manaschı) Toktogul Nooruz
18th century Manaschıs	Keldibek Karboz uulu Balık (Bekmurat Kumar uulu) Nazar Bolot (1828-1893) Tinıbek Japıy uulu (1846-1902)
Pre-Soviet and Soviet Manaschıs	Togolok Moldo (1860-1942) Shapak Rısmende uulu (1863-1956) Sagımbai Orozbekov (1867-1930) Bagış Sazan uulu (1878-1958) Moldobasan Musulmankulov (1883-1961) İbiraiım Abdırakhmanov (1888-1967) Sayakbai Karalaev (1894-1971) Mambet Chokmorov (1896-1973)
Soviet and post-Soviet Manaschıs	Yusuf Mamai (1918) Seidene Moldokova (1922) Kaba Atabekov (1926-2008) Shaabai Azizov (1927-2004) Urkash Mambetaliev (1935) Kanimbübü Abraimova Talantaalı Bakchiev (1971) Azat (1981)

Toktogul-ırchı is described as a legendary poet. In Kyrgyz, *legendarduu* means ‘from legends’, the word does not share the English figurative meaning of ‘fabulous’.

Nevertheless, he is treated as a historic figure by the same scholars that call him legendary. Genealogical calculations trace Toktogul back to the second half of the fourteenth century (Asankanov and Bekmuhamedova, 1999:71). Little else is known about Toktogul ırchı. Folk tales say that when Toktogul recited, not only people, but also birds, cattle, trees, rivers and mountains listened with bated breath (Musaev translated in Aliev et.al., 1995:283). Toktogul’s name is remembered in the Kyrgyz saying:

May you be a poet like Toktogul, may you be an expert like Tolubai  
(*Toktoguldai ırchı bol, Tolubaidai sınchı bol*) (ME II:284).

One easily mixes up this legendary Toktogul with either of two other poets by the name of Toktogul, who have gained considerable fame in Kyrgyzstan. The most famous is Toktogul Satılganov (1864-1933), a celebrated People's Artist of the Soviet Union. Many streets, parks, schools and libraries are named after him, and his statue adorns the hall of Bishkek's *Philharmonia*. Toktogul Satılganov composed songs that were critical of the Tsarist regime, which made him a Soviet favourite<sup>46</sup>. The third poet with the name Toktogul, Toktogul Kalmamat uulu, was a performer of the Manas epic. He was born in 1854 in Özgön, in the South of Kyrgyzstan. The Manas Encyclopaedia gives a short biography: at the age of thirteen, Toktogul broke away from his father and went to tend the horses of a *biy*. Later he worked as a hunter, and all the while he collected and told tales and songs. He learned Manas episodes from other Great Manaschīs of his time. His son Akmat wrote down his versions and became a Manaschī himself (ME II:284).

After legendary Toktogul, the next Manas teller that is kept in oral tradition is Nooruz. Nooruz is said to have been a celebrated epic performer who presumably lived in the eighteenth century (Musaev translated in Aliev et.al., 1995:283). Although he is often mentioned in enumerations of Manaschīs, it is difficult to find any information about him. Even the otherwise extensive Manas Encyclopaedia does not contain a section on Nooruz. On the internet one can find many presentations on the Manas that state that Nooruz was vital in compiling and enriching the epic. Unfortunately, I have not been able to trace how this idea took hold. Another Nooruz who is known in connection to the Manas epic is Nooruz-Mohammed, the son of Seif ad-Din Aksykent from Ferghana. In the sixteenth century, father and son wrote the Farsi text *Majmu-al-Tarikh*. This text mentions Manas as a historic figure and accounts of his heroic deeds, relating them to events of the second half of the fourteenth century (see chapter three).

After Toktogul and Nooruz, we find the eighteenth-century Manas teller Keldibek Karboz uulu. The story goes that when he recited the Manas, people left their livestock outside, because nobody would try to steal them. While he sang, the yurta shook, a hurricane of fearful force arose, and in the gloom and noise of the hurricane there flew invisible horsemen – Manas and his knights. From the thudding of their horses' hooves, the ground shuddered (Shoolbraid, 1975:43). This story was also told to me by Kalkan, the in-law (*kuda*) of my host family in Kazıbek, a performing poet (*akin*) who claimed descent

---

<sup>46</sup> I have found no references of Toktogul performing the Manas or using elements of the epic, but as contemporary poets often draw upon the Manas epic, it would be interesting to see if this was common in Toktogul's time as well.

from Keldibek. Kalkan added to the story that when Keldibek recited, the sick were cured, arguing couples were reconciled, bachelors found a spouse and childless couples would conceive. Kalkan made a point of telling me that Keldibek was the last Great Manaschī. He claimed that all the people that have called themselves Manaschī since him merely repeat what Keldibek and his predecessors created. Although this interview took place within the first three months of my research, I already understood Kalkan was advocating a deviant view. My translator Kalbübü later agreed with me that Kalkan was exaggerating Keldibek's status because he was from the same clan (*uruu*). Another motive for Kalkan to try and convince me to believe Keldibek was the last Great Manaschī may have been the fact that Kalkan was working on a book on Khan Koshoi<sup>47</sup>. He may have felt that the attention of a foreign scholar could enhance his status as a writer, and since I was interested in Manaschīs, my interest could be won by his close association with the last Great Manaschī. Clearly, he had used his connection with Keldibek more often to give fundament to his status as a poet, for he owned a painting that portrayed his face emerging from a background of three faces: that of his father, his grandfather, and Keldibek. However, by picturing Keldibek as the last real Manaschī, Kalkan overstepped himself. He could not escape giving contradictory statements - for instance when he boasted Keldibek's authority by telling me he was the teacher of Sagımbai Orozbekov, one of the two Great Manaschīs in the Soviet age. I asked Kalkan how he could see Sagımbai as a real Manaschī if Keldibek was the last real Manaschī. The men in the room exchanged glances and smiles, but Kalkan ignored the contradiction in his statements and proceeded to tell me that Keldibek had been told that at the age of seventy, he would meet another real Manaschī whom he would have to teach. Incidentally, the Manas Encyclopaedia does not mention a connection between Sagımbai and Keldibek. Kalkan also claimed that Keldibek was taught by the equally famous Balık, but the Encyclopaedia contradicts that too: Balık lived later than Keldibek.

Balık was the nickname of Bekmurat Kumar uulu, an eighteenth-century Manaschī from Talas. He told the Manas for the *kushbek* of the town Namangen in present-day Uzbekistan, and when he was invited by the well-known *manap* Baitik of the Solto-clan, he moved to Chüy (ME I:137). Balık remained with Baitik until Baitik's death, and he himself died five years later at the age of eighty (ibid.).

---

<sup>47</sup> Khan Koshoi is a character from the Manas and other Turkic tales. Near the village Kazıbek are the ruins of an old fortress, known as Koshoi Korgon. My informants told me that Khan Koshoi resided in this fortress.

Tinibek Japiy uulu is the next famous Manas narrator in line. He lived from 1846 until 1902 and witnessed the incorporation of the Kyrgyz into the Russian empire. Tinibek is the first narrator of whom a written version of epic tales was published – that is, after the anonymous verses recorded by Radloff and Valikhanov. The Manas Encyclopaedia shows a picture of the cover of a booklet called ‘One part from Semetei’ (*Semeteiden bir bölüm*), written in the Arabic script. The booklet counts 184 pages and was published long after Tinibek’s death in 1925, by a Moscow publisher. The Manas Encyclopaedia reveals little about the recording and publication of this booklet. It only quotes Tinibek’s own memories of the process:

In 1898, the Narin District gave the order to write down Manas and Semetei (ME II:302).

Next in order comes a host of Manaschīs who witnessed the change to the Soviet Period. Togolok Moldo (1860-1942), Shapak Rismende uulu (1863-1956), Bagish Sazan uulu (1878-1958), Moldobasan Musulmankulov<sup>48</sup> (1883-1961), İbiraiim Abdırakhmanov (1888-1967) and Mambet Chokmorov (1896-1973) are well-known, but most famous are Sagimbai<sup>49</sup> Orozbekov (1867-1930) and Sayakbai Karalaev (1894-1971). Sagimbai and Sayakbai became icons of Kyrgyz art and folklore in the Soviet period. The Soviet regime did not simply suppress artistic expressions of national minorities, but often actively propagated them. Manaschīs of pre-Soviet times were incorporated in the extensive recordings of folklore, their versions were published, newspaper articles on their art appeared and they were asked to perform locally, nationally and Union-wide. Sagimbai and Sayakbai became the two most celebrated Manaschīs, and to this present day are referred to as the Greatest Manaschīs of our time. Very often they are also said to be the last Manaschīs or ‘the last of the Mohicans’ – but I have heard the very same people that label Sagimbai and Sayakbai the last Manaschīs promote the importance and skills of present-day Manaschīs with equal vigour.

---

<sup>48</sup> Kyrgyz surnames can be given in their Russian and Kyrgyz version. In Russian, Musulmankulov literally means ‘of Musulmankul’. The Kyrgyz version is Musulmankul uulu, which means ‘son of Musulmankul’. The use of Kyrgyz surnames has become fashionable since *perestroika*. This does not always have a merely nationalist intention, it can also be used to indicate the particularly Kyrgyz realm, in contrast to the international or interethnic realm. I will generally use the Russian forms, as they are the most commonly used in daily speech. For Manaschīs who lived before Russian influence became dominant, it makes sense to use the Kyrgyz forms.

<sup>49</sup> In older texts, the name Sagınbai occurs. Recently, this version of his name is in vogue again by people who claim that Sagimbai was a Russian corruption. I will hold on to Sagimbai, however, as this spelling was most common during my fieldwork time.

Togolok Moldo, whose real name is Baiimbet Abdırakman uulu, was born in the Narın area. He learned to write from a *moldo*, the Kyrgyz word for mullah that refers rather to the moldo's knowledge and literacy than his association with Islam. The nickname Togolok Moldo that he received from his audiences should therefore be translated as 'Learned Person with a Round Face'. Togolok Moldo wrote and performed poetry, songs, tales and genealogies (ME II:281). He travelled all over the Kyrgyz territory and met with famous poets and storytellers. His hand-written versions of *Manas*, *Semetei en Seitek* are kept in the archives of the Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences. Togolok Moldo was picked up as a folk icon during Soviet times as well, but rather as a poet (*akin*) than as a *Manaschi*. Many roads were named after him, and his statue can be found in numerous schools and club houses until today. When independent Kyrgyzstan issued its own currency, Togolok Moldo's image was chosen to decorate the twenty som note, with the *Manas* mausoleum on the reverse (see figure 2.2).



Figure 2.2 Twenty-som note with Togolok Moldo and the *Manas* Mausoleum

Shapak and Bagış were two *Manaschi*s from what is now the Narın Province. Both *Manaschi*s had tales from their *Manas*, *Semetei* and *Seitek* versions written down between 1935 and 1949. Shapak fled to the Chinese town Turpan after the revolt of 1916, to return

a year later (ME II:346). He knew many tales, songs and Kyrgyz genealogies (*sanjira*). Bagışh was different from other Manaschīs in that he did not travel around to recite. He only rarely went to places where he was invited (ME I:122). Bagışh was the grandchild on his mother's side (*jeen*) of Great Manaschī Tinibek, and as a child he spent much time in his grandfather's village. Both Shapak and Bagışh met Sagımbai, and Shapak worked closely with him (ME II:346).

Moldobasan, another Manaschī from Narin, was a virtuoso musician as well as a narrator. He played the three-stringed *komuz*, that is nowadays often referred to as the Kyrgyz National Instrument. In 1933 when he was fifty years of age, Moldobasan joined the Kyrgyzstan State Theatre, where he recited the Manas and other tales, and played the *komuz* (ME II:110). His recitals are remembered as very musical. However, he did not accompany his Manas recital with the *komuz*. This was taboo for Manas recitals, and it still is today<sup>50</sup>. Moldobasan was the father of the grandmother that lived with my host family in Kazıbek. The family told me that Moldobasan was the greatest Manaschī after Sagımbai. They also told me that one of his grandsons was now a famous music conductor in Bishkek. They were proud of him, but also disappointed that he did so little to help my host father Keldibei with his musical career.

İbiraıim Abdırakhmanov, a Manaschī from the İssikköl area, was a different kind of Manaschī altogether. Although he told the Manas himself, his main effort lay in collecting the versions of Manaschīs of his time, and as a scholar, he is commonly referred to by his surname rather than his first name. Abdırakhmanov moved to what is now called Kazıbek later in life, and he died there in 1967.

Mambet Chokmorov was also from the İssikköl area. He became a Manaschī one year after the Revolution. He lived a rural life, travelled around to narrate the Manas, but did not participate in the new urban spheres of culture and science. He did not take part in Soviet-style Manaschī competitions, and when in 1965 Manas scholars commenced to record his version of the Manas, they came to his house for sessions in stead of inviting him to the capital. Mambet is remembered for his strong healing powers (*kasiet*). One month after my arrival in Kyrgyzstan, a grand celebration of Mambet's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary was held in his village. Horse races, wrestling and eagle hunts were the highlights of this celebration, together with Manas recitals and good food.

---

<sup>50</sup> There have been reports from non-Kyrgyz observers of Manaschīs using a stringed instrument. Also the portrait of Kenje-Kara sketched by B.V. Smirnov in 1903 shows the Semeteichi with a stringed instrument distinct from the *komuz* or *dombra*.

The next generation of Manaschīs were raised in the Soviet system. They were not made into icons as Sagimbai and Sayakbai were, but they were cherished as important preservers of the tradition. These Manaschīs witnessed the transition of the Soviet system to Kyrgyzstan's independence, and gained recognition during the 'Manas 1,000' festival. The Great Manaschīs of these days are Kaba Atabekov (1926-2008)<sup>51</sup>, Shaabai Azizov (1927-2004), and Yusuf Mamai (1918). Kaba and Shaabai are oral reciters in the traditional sense. In contrast, Yusuf, who lives in Kashkar in China, does not perform but writes his version. Other important Manaschīs of this category are the female Manaschī Seidene Moldokova (1922) and the official Manaschī of the *Philharmonia* Urkash Mambetaliev (1935).



Figure 2.3 Kyrgyzstan's Great Manaschīs: Shaabai, Seidene and Kaba (1999)

The pool of present-day Manaschīs contains many more individuals. Some of them are not famous and do not strive to be and others are not famous yet. I will introduce three of them: Talantaalī Bakchiev (1971)<sup>52</sup>, Kanımbübü Abraimova (?)<sup>53</sup> and Azat (1981). Talantaalī Bakchiev is a prime example of a young Manaschī who is striving hard for recognition in the field, and who has all the potential to become a future Great Manaschī.

<sup>51</sup> See chapter one, paragraph 1.3.2

<sup>52</sup> See chapter one, paragraph 1.3.3 and 1.3.4

<sup>53</sup> See chapter one, paragraph 1.3.1



Kanimbübü Abraimova is a female Manaschī from a small village who has local recognition, but is mostly interested in the Manas for its spiritual value. Azat is a young man who falls into fits of Manas recital, which he finds hard to handle.

## **2.2 How to Become a Manaschī**

For most Manaschīs, the most important step in becoming a Manaschī occurred when they received a vocation dream. In a way very similar to Siberian shamans, most Manaschīs have been called to their profession in a dream or a vision where they were visited by the spirits (*arbaktar*) of Manas, his relatives and his comrades. The spirits give him or her both the order and the inspiration to tell the story about their lives. After the vocation dream, Manaschīs often have other inspirational dreams that reveal new episodes of the story.

The stress on vocation and inspiration dreams has rendered talk of other forms of learning almost a taboo. The ability to recite the Manas is regarded as a gift from the spirit of Manas. It is not a personal achievement acquired by hard work or individual genius, but it is rather seen as a task that has to be performed. When I asked Manaschīs about their first years of Manaschīhood, they spoke of dreams, visions and other supernatural occurrences, but not of training sessions. Their initial problems with performing in public were not created by a lack of an oeuvre or inexperience in the spontaneous creation of poetry, but rather by personal shyness, or the uneasiness of their parents with the powers of the Manas. The life stories told by the Manaschīs leaves the impression that from the moment of their vocation dream on, they were skilled and apt reciters. They do not mention long hours of hard work, trial and error learning, or the frustration that is often associated with mastering a skill in the West. Einstein's idea that genius is the result of 99% perspiration and 1% inspiration is reverted to the opposite in the Kyrgyz context. This is not to say that practice sessions are absent in the training of a young Manaschī, but only that the stress is on inspiration. It would be interesting to investigate how this different approach influences the actual learning process.

### **2.2.1 The Vocation Dream**

Anyone who claims to be a real Manaschī has a story of a vocation dream. Dream calling is vital to the status of 'real Manaschī'. This idea was expressed by my informants, Manaschī and non-Manaschī alike. The Manas Encyclopaedia also states:

among the people there is the understanding that only after seeing a dream a person can be a real Manaschī (ME II:76).



Dreams in general play an important role in the life of Kyrgyz people. Families often discuss their dreams in the morning, and interpret them according to a number of fixed symbolisms. For instance, dreaming of a child means that someone will fall ill, dreams of faeces or toilets foretell wealth, a dream where a tooth falls out means someone close will die – the closer the tooth, the closer the relative or friend. A dream that features a world leader is always a good sign, no matter who he or she is or how the dreamer thinks about this person. Many people know the meanings of basic symbols, but there are also specialists in dream interpretation. Interestingly, the interpretation of the dream is just as important as the dream itself in what will happen afterwards. It is therefore important to always give a positive explanation of the dream. One day I asked a friend how the Kyrgyz would explain the dream of a Swiss friend of mine who was pregnant. She dreamt that her baby was a girl, and the baby was born during the dream. My Kyrgyz friend fell silent for a while, and then carefully said that dreaming of a child means illness, but as the child was born, the disease would be driven out.

There is a special role for the ancestor spirits in dreams. The family in Kazıbek once slaughtered a lamb and held a special *Kuran* reading session the day after the mother had dreamt of their deceased son. All sons and daughters that lived in the village came over to celebrate this occasion. There is also a set of rules on how to interact with spirits in a dream. If a deceased person asks for something in the dream, you should never give it, because that will enable him to take you to the other world. On the other hand, if the spirit of a deceased person offers you something in the dream, that is a very good thing. In the calling dreams of Manaschıs, the dreamer meets with the spirits of Manas, his wife, relatives and comrades. The spirits usually give the future Manaschı something to eat or drink, introduce the characters from the Manas to the future Manaschı and tell him that if he refuses to tell the Manas, he will become blind or crippled. These are the elements that recur in almost every vocation dream, although every dreamer has his or her own version.

The Great Manaschı Kaba Atabekov was called to become a Manaschı in 1935, when he was nine years old. The story that Kaba told me in our first interview has a number of conflicting elements, that can be due to either my lack of understanding (Kaba speaks the Kyrgyz of elder villagers that I found hard to understand) or of incoherencies that are inherent to oral accounts. What Kaba told me was that when he was nine years old, he lived alone with his 37-year old mother. His father had passed away. One night they were out in the fields with their yurt, and Kaba could not sleep. When he finally managed to fall asleep, he dreamt that a very big man came towards him. This man was Almambet,

Manas' best friend, and with him came Manas' advisor Bakai and the knights Chubak, Syrgak and Ashuay. They were talking about Khan Koshoi, a befriended Khan from the At-Bashī area. Suddenly Almambet turned to Kaba and said that he would see a big battle between the Chinese and the Kyrgyz in his dream. The enemies he would see would be Kongurbai, Neskara, Tagilik and Joigara. Almambet told Kaba all about this war. Kaba then sat up and started to tell the story he saw in his dream. That first time, he recited for one hour. His mother, who was all alone, was frightened by Kaba's strange behaviour. She reacted angrily and tried to make her son go back to sleep. After his first recital, Kaba fell asleep and stayed asleep for three days, without eating anything. After three days, Kaba got up, ate something and went to the field where his two-year younger brother was tending their six cows. Two weeks went by. Meanwhile, his mother conferred with people about what to do with Kaba's calling. Then, one day in May, three men came out to the field where Kaba worked. They tied his hands to his back and put him up to his knees into the water, and left. Kaba did not understand what was going on, and he was so cold that he could not see anymore. All alone, and afraid he was going to die, Kaba started to recite the Manas. His little brother had seen the men come and go. Somehow, Kaba managed to get back home where he changed his clothes. He did not recite the Manas for another month. But when Kaba's uncle Asambek, the elder brother of his deceased father, heard about Kaba's calling, he called a meeting with four elders. The four elders came to the yurta under the pretence of reading Kuran for Kaba's father, but the real reason for the invitation became clear when Kaba was asked to recite the Manas for them. Kaba was a very shy boy and needed a lot of urging before he dared to start. Once he started, however, he captured the audience. The meat did not burn because the fire had gone out, as everyone was busy listening to Kaba. After Kaba's recital, the elders read Kuran for him and gave him their blessings (*bata*). This was the start of Kaba's career as a Manaschi.

In the Manas Encyclopaedia, J. Saginov gives a completely different version of Kaba Atabekov's calling story. He writes the following:

**Kaba** Atabek Uulu (1926, Tong rayon, village of Törtkül) – Manaschi. At the age of ten he started to tell the Manas. Like the majority of Manaschis, his telling of the Manas started with a magical dream. In his dream he sees an old man with a white hat (*kalpak*) on a horse with manes that reach to the ground. He hears a soft noise far away, and as it comes closer, he discovers a horseman holding a spear and an axe who seems to be chasing an enemy. He sweeps up black dust, makes the earth tremble and the frame of the yurta screech. The old man who is on the other side

gives the boy something from his own hands, saying: ‘Eat this! If you don’t, I will drag you on my horse and take you to the enemy!’ The boy is frightened by his stern words and quickly eats the thing. The thing is like sand (...). He said: ‘From this time on, you have to tell the Manas, if you don’t I will come back to cripple you and make you blind.’ Early in the morning when he woke up, without telling anyone, he went outside the fence to think about last night’s dream and how he should tell the Manas, because where-ever he went, he just wanted to recite the Manas. (...) (ME I:253).

Talantaalī Bakchiev told me part of his vocation dream the second time we met. He told me that at the age of twelve, he had the first of his Manas-related dreams. Manaschī Sayakbai Karalaev came to him in his dream and told him to start telling Manas. After that, he often went to herd sheep near a *mazar* (a sacred place), where he had many dreams in which he met characters from the Manas. During my second fieldwork period, Talantaalī took me to his home village and pointed out all the places where he had had visions and dreams. We went to the banks of the river Jirgalang, where Talantaalī had been visited by Manas’ wife Khanikei, his son Semetei and his mother Chiyirdi. They had ordered Talantaalī to tell Manas, and after they left, Sayakbai appeared to teach him how to recite. Talantaalī also took me to the *mazar*, which turned out to be a tree along a sandy road with ribbons tied to the branches. Here, Talantaalī saw the knights (*choro*) Almambet and Sīrgak, and one day as he walked back from this place, he was followed by two black panthers. He assumed these must have been his guardian spirits (*koldochular*). When I told Talantaalī that in the weeks before I came to Kyrgyzstan I had had two dreams about black panthers, he was excited and said they were clearly omens of our future contact.

Talantaalī also told his vocation dream to students at the American University in Kyrgyzstan during a lesson about Manas. He explained that he too had become Kirgiz instead of Kyrgyz<sup>54</sup>. His maternal grandfather (*tai-ata*) opened his eyes when he took him to the summer pastures (*jailoo*). In 1982 and 1983 he had his vocation dream at Jirgalang *mazar*. He dreamt that Sayakbai, whom he had seen often on television, asked him whose child he was. He asked Talantaalī if he knew his clan (*uruu*), and Talantaalī said no. Sayakbai told him he was *Sarī Kalpak*, just like himself, and that they were related from their fourth father (paternal great-great-grandfather). He asked Talantaalī if he would tell Manas, and Talantaalī answered ‘yes’. Sayakbai then told him about the Great Campaign,

---

<sup>54</sup> In the 1990s, the Russian word ‘Kirgiz’ was a popular synonym for the Russified Kyrgyz.

in the presence of Great Manaschīs Kaba Atabekov and Shaabai Azizov. Then the vision changed. Talantaali was sitting in between two Russians, a man and a woman, who told him to enter a yurt (*boz-üy*). Inside the yurt he saw Khanikey, Semetei and Chüyirdi who offered him a white liquid, which was neither water nor *kimiz* (fermented mare's milk). Then suddenly it all vanished. His parents did not understand much of Talant's dreams and visions. They were young, Talantaali said, but his maternal grandfather did understand and sent him to Great Manaschi Shaabai Azizov, who became his mentor. Shaabai helped him to behave like a true Manaschi, and told him which parts he could recite for which audience.

Kanimbübü Abdraimova, the female Manaschi from Kazibek village, was modest about the role of dreams for her recital skills. She did not claim to have had a vocation dream, but explained that her father, who was an illiterate *akın*, often asked her to read the Manas for him. The dreams of giants on horses that she had at that time, Kanimbübü explains as being the result of all the reading for her father. She started to recite at social gatherings, although as she was a 'difficult child', the recitals would not always come out well. She studied at the music school in Bishkek and had the chance to develop her talent. During her studies she worked in the *Philharmonia* where she recited the Manas, danced and acted. Her time in Bishkek came to an end in 1963, when Kanimbübü was present at a meeting concerning the celebration of 100 years of unity between the Kyrgyz and the Russians. This meeting turned into a riot when Kyrgyz protested the way the Russians had treated them over those years, and the Russians killed a number of protestors<sup>55</sup>. She herself was cut with a knife, and people assumed she was dead. She was taken to the mortuary, but when people realised she was still alive she was taken to the hospital. The incident caused her dismissal from her employment, she fell ill and went back to the village to get married. Married life was difficult. She became a 'Hero Mother' (*baatır ene*) after having ten children, but they were poor. In these days, she often dreamt about Bakai, Manas' counsellor, who hit her with a mace but remained silent. She recited the Manas in these days, but only to herself when she was out in the mountains. This would make her feel better. When she kept dreaming about Bakai, she began to recite in public again, but as she said, 'in the wrong situations where people drank alcohol'. Kanimbübü's five daughters

---

<sup>55</sup> I have not been able to find out if this actually happened. Given Kanimbübü's sincerity about her life story, that she illustrated with documents, and the Soviet habit of keeping riots a secret, I have no reason to doubt its actual occurrence.

also recited the Manas, and just like their mother, they were often ill<sup>56</sup>. Because of their illness, Kaniimbübü contacted the International Association of Parapsychology and Occult Sciences ‘Talisman’<sup>57</sup>, who measured a specific energy within her and her daughters. Kaniimbübü now realised she had to become a healer instead of a Manaschī. She dreamt that Manas told her to become a healer, and the next day she cured 40 people. Kaniimbübü’s daughter studied at the academy of the same association, where she graduated in hypnosis and psychobioenergo-suggestion<sup>58</sup>, and now she heals people with energy. In the year 1995, the year of the ‘Manas 1,000’ festival, Kaniimbübü began dreaming of Manas again. She was visited by the festival organiser of the At-Bashī region, who asked her to participate in a Manaschī contest that was organised to find Manaschīs for recitals at the main celebrations in Talas. Kaniimbübü was ill at the time, but as she had dreamt that her name was first on the list, she went there. She won the contest in At Bashī, and in Bishkek she became third. Kaniimbübü proudly showed me the certificates of the two contests. At the time of the Talas celebrations she was too ill to go, but she did not mind. She was surprised that she made it to the third prize with all the famous Manaschīs there. She told me that she had prayed to Manas all the time and the words came by themselves. After the recital in Bishkek she lost the ability to recite the Manas and went back to healing.

The Great Manaschīs of the previous generation were also called in a dream. Sayakbai Karalaev received a dream when he was 22 years of age (ME II:185). A. Saliev gives an elaborate description of this event in his article ‘Old Epic Enters the New World’ (translated in Aliev et.al., 1995:450-451). Early one morning, Sayakbai rode his horse through a canyon. Suddenly he heard a terrible shriek, and terrified that this might be a witch (*albarsti*), he fled as fast as he could. He came to the place where a grey rock used to be, but now he found a beautifully decorated yurt there. A beautiful woman came out of the yurt and invited him inside to taste the food. Sayakbai went inside, feeling very ashamed of his old clothes, and ate from all the dishes that the woman offered him. Then he realised that this beautiful woman was Khanīkey, Manas’ wife. As Sayakbai left the yurt, he encountered a man on a horse who was holding a spear. The man offered him millet and told him not to be afraid but to eat it. Sayakbai put the millet in his mouth, but it was too sandy to swallow. The old man shouted at him to swallow it, and then Sayakbai

---

<sup>56</sup> Kaniimbübü called their illness *talma*, which she described as something very similar to epilepsy.

<sup>57</sup> Kaniimbübü told me that this was an international organisation, and their teachers were from the Ukrain.

<sup>58</sup> These terms I found on her graduation certificate that was in both English and Russian.

realised it was Bakai, Manas' advisor. Another man on a horse appeared, together with more riders. Bakai introduced them as Manas, Almambet, Chubak, Sirgak and Töshtük, and told Sayakbai to remember them well, for in seven years' time, he would tell the people about them. Bakai ordered Sayakbai to buy the two sheep of the man he would meet the next day, to slaughter the sheep, invite the village elders to eat the meat and ask for their blessings (*bata*). Then Sayakbai heard Manas shout something, and before he knew it, they all disappeared, leaving Sayakbai in the dust near the big grey rock. As Sayakbai went home, he did indeed meet an old man with two sheep, which he bought and sacrificed for the elders' blessings. Seven years later Sayakbai became restless and received many visions of Manas and his fellows. His parents told him he had started to recite the Manas in his sleep. He had become a Manaschī.

Of the Great Manaschī Sagımbai Orozbekov, who was Sayakbai's senior by 33 years, there is only a brief mention of his calling dream in the Manas Encyclopaedia:

Like all Manaschīs, Sagımbai also began to tell the Manas after a dream. But his Manaschīship was greatly influenced by Balık, Naimanbai, Tinibek, Akilbek, Diykanbai and other Manaschīs (ME II:167).

Sagımbai is said to have been a singer and story teller at social events when he was young. He started to tell Manas when he was 15 or 16 years of age. But at social events, people mostly requested lyrical songs, or mourning songs at funerals. Sagımbai nurtured his epic genre himself and learnt the Manas part by part.

The presentation of Sagımbai's professional history thus places a far greater emphasis on personal interest and external human influence than the "calling" stories of later Manaschīs. This seems to suggest that the idea of a calling by the spirits might be a recent additional element. Daniel Prior advocates this idea when he states that:

Claims of dream-inspiration are recorded from bards of the past such as Sagımbay, yet it is striking that by the end of the Soviet era virtually all bards credited the source of their artistry to dream-inspiration, typically in the form of an apparition of Manas or some other hero commanding them to sing the epics. The increasing references to dream-inspiration may have been defensive measures on the part of the bards. (...) the prerogative to claim dream-inspiration would seem to provide an oral practitioner a degree of security in negotiating his position with an all-powerful and inconstant patron like the Soviet state (Prior, 2000:36).

If we follow Prior's argument, the statement in the Manas Encyclopaedia that Sagımbai had a calling dream 'like all Manaschīs' may have been inspired by hind-sight perception,

written in an age when the vocation dream has become indispensable. Since no detail of Sagımbai's dream is mentioned, this may very well be true. The Encyclopaedia also refers only briefly, if at all, to calling dreams of other Manaschīs in Sagımbai's time. On Balık, who was born in 1793, the Encyclopaedia writes:

Balık started to tell folk stories, songs and Manas in the village when he was 13 – 14. At 20, he easily improvised and sang long parts. He too started to tell Manas after a dream, according to custom (ME I:137).

Of the later Manaschī Akılbek (1840-unknown) there is no news at all of a calling dream. In the section on Diykanbai (1873-1923) there is mention of a vocation, but not in a dream. Diykanbai is told to have met a *dervish* who spat him thrice in the mouth, hit him on the cheek and told him to tell the Manas (ME I:191).

On Tınıbek (1846-1902), however, there is a large section describing his dream. Again we read that:

like with other Manaschīs, Tınıbek too started to tell the Manas after having a magical dream (ME II:301).

The story goes that when Tınıbek was nine, he passed an inn on the road to Karakol town. The inn keeper enjoyed his singing and gave Tınıbek a place to sleep next to the horses. At night, Tınıbek dreamt that he was in the foothills near the lakeside, among a big crowd of people on enormous horses carrying swords, spears and guns. An intimidating strong young man summoned Tınıbek and introduced all the people in the crowd to him in verse. Afterwards, the man took Tınıbek to the lake and said: 'That big crowd of people over there is Kongurbai's army. They are coming to get us. We will disperse and fall, and be scattered in every direction. As we flee from them, we won't get out alive. Now, Tınıbek, when tomorrow comes, you will find a black sheep. Shoot this sheep for the spirit of Manas. Then tell the people who will slaughter the sheep about the hero Manas. If you don't, you will become crippled'. Then Manas himself came up to Tınıbek and asked him to tell about their lives. Tınıbek, who did not dare to look Manas in the eyes, said: 'I will, hero.' When Tınıbek woke up, he noticed that he was sitting up straight, entirely naked. When he walked to the place he had seen in his dream, he found footprints of a horse and footprints that matched his own. The next day, Tınıbek went to the village of the inn keepers. The inn keepers had gathered to hear Tınıbek's songs and they slaughtered a sheep. The sheep was black, just like the sheep the man from his dream had spoken of. That night, Tınıbek told the Manas. On the road to Karakol, he told the Manas for two more days. But when he got home, he only recited the Manas to himself. His father did not

find out about his calling until two years later, and then sent him to the Great Manaschī Narmantai to be taught.

Sayakbai's contemporary Mambet Chokmorov (1896-1973) is also introduced with a vocation dream in the Encyclopaedia. The story is very similar to that which is described in the booklet *Manaschī Mambet Chokmorov (Commemoration) 100*, published for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mambet in 1996, although the latter has a more elaborate tale. As a four-year old boy, Mambet saw the hero Manas walk in the fields. This event was forgotten by his mother and himself, until he turned 22 and received a vocation dream. Mambet fell asleep on the mountain Tastar-Ata south of Lake İssikköl. He saw a crowd carrying a blue flag, and heard a voice next to him asking if he knew these people. When Mambet said he didn't, someone shouted: 'I will pierce him on my spear!' The voice next to Mambet said: 'Don't be afraid, that is Manas. From now on you shall tell the Manas' (ibid.:3). For two years, Mambet could not tell the Manas, and he had a hard time. He fell ill and became paralysed. At that time he only narrated the Manas on his own in deserted places. His grandfather understood what was going on and made him tell the Manas for a group of people. That was the start of Mambet's Manaschīhood.

Conversely, two other Manaschīs of the era of Sayakbai, Moldobasan and Abdirakhmanov, are not presented in the Manas Encyclopaedia as dream-called Manaschīs. Moldobasan is said to have started his career as a singer (*ırchı*) and gradually added Manas songs to his repertoire. Abdirakhmanov learnt the Manas from listening to the Manaschīs at long evening recitals in the winter camp.

The question of whether vocation dreams are a recent phenomenon or not remains unsolved. One might argue that the dream story of Tinıbek and Mambet were created in a later period, when dream vocations became more important. However, the contrary may also be possible. It is just as likely that in times of socialist realism dream stories became seen as relics from a backward tradition, and Manaschīs who wanted to be taken seriously in this new epoch would tell a different story on the origins of their skills. This may have been the case with Abdırakmanov and Moldobasan. What we know for sure is that presently, high value is placed on the vocation dream. The frequent occasion of supernatural elements that surround epic telling is deeply ingrained in the experience of Manaschīs and their audiences. This gives the impression that it is not a recent phenomenon, and most probably a tradition older than a mere century.

It is striking that most Manas scholars dismiss the possibility of dream inspiration as a genuine driving force for Manaschīs. A positivist academic tradition with its rejection



of supernatural events as real has led scholars to see the vocation dream as a phenomenon that needs to be explained away in rationalist terms. Kyrgyzstani Manas scholars such as Bolotbek Sadıkov and Aziz Saliev explain the vocation dream as a psychological phenomenon, placing the origin rather in an individual's wish to become a Manaschı than in the wish of Manas to have his tale told (Akmataliev, 1996:10, Saliev translated in Aliev et.al., 1995:452). In an article written in 1979 and republished in 1995 in Russian, English and German, leading Manas scholar S. Musaev even doubts whether the dream vocation stories are always true:

Obviously, among narrators there are those who have not dreamed, but pass it as truth to appear as a real chosen manaschi in the eyes of the listeners, however one needs to remember that all story tellers of Manas without exception talk about dream-visions (Musaev 1995:39,40)<sup>59</sup>.

Daniel Prior, who speaks of a 'claim' in the passage quoted earlier, seems to think along the same lines. The word 'claim' implies that the actual occurrence of a dream may be doubtful. Prior and Musaev place the importance of a dream story not in the individual experience of a Manaschı, but in the presentation to an outside audience. The dream is interpreted in a functionalist way, especially when Prior suggests that the claim of a dream provides security against the Soviet state – although he omits to explain how that would work. Most likely, Prior refers to a possibility for Manaschıs to deny responsibility for the words they utter – they can always claim the story was given to them by a dream and was not their own creation. The Manaschıs I encountered, however, genuinely saw the source of their dreams outside themselves and they did not doubt that the dreams were true communications with the spirits of Manas and his fellows.

I see no reason to dismiss the possibility of communication with spirits out of hand, but I do see the added value of psychological and social explanations. Dream inspiration compares well to the inspiration through dreams that is experienced by artists who do not believe in communication with spirits of the deceased. In this light the dreams are a part of the creative process, and can be interpreted as a means for the subconscious to reach the conscious level of the mind (Musaev, 1994:121). Social explanations also add to understanding the phenomenon of inspirational and vocation dreams. A vocation dream is elementary for providing a Manaschı with the status of Real Manaschı (*Chınıgı Manaschı*). It gives the Manaschı the connection with the supernatural that provides him with the aura

---

<sup>59</sup> Interestingly, in the abbreviated version of the article published in the articles' collection in 1995, this passage is left out (Aliev et.al., 1995:51).

of being special, different and respectable. It also gives the Manaschī credibility, for if his recitals come directly from the source, the story must be true. Prior's argument that it provides Manaschīs with security in negotiating with the unreliable Soviet government can only have worked if they encountered Soviet officials whose attachment to the Kyrgyz belief system was stronger than to communist atheist ideology. An official who does not believe that the spirit of Manas can actually communicate his version of the story to a Manaschī will not be inclined to let a Manaschī off the hook for saying reactionary things. However, it seems likely that many Kyrgyz Soviet officials did indeed believe in dream inspiration – that is, if one can project back in time the many occasions when I encountered officials who at first spoke with scepticism about the supernatural elements of the Manas but who turned into fervent proponents after I asked a few more questions. It remains difficult to judge how officials dealt with the tension between the two belief systems at that time, when repression and punishment were ever-present threats. Furthermore, if both Manaschīs and officials actually believed in dream inspiration, it is unlikely that Manaschīs would contemplate the idea and pretend their versions were not theirs but Manas'. The spirit of Manas is considered dangerous if he is abused or ill-treated. A present-day Manaschī once confessed to one of my informants that he never had a vocation dream. My informant was shocked that he had told him about this, for it gave my informant the possibility to destroy the reputation of the Manaschī. However, despite the social dangers, a Manaschī would think twice to falsely claim dream vocation. In the Manas Encyclopaedia, for example, the matter of whether this Manaschī had a vocation dream is carefully avoided – a blatant lie would not be an option, as this might cost the Manaschī his life or sanity.

### 2.2.2 Vocation and Inspiration

Dream inspiration does not stop after the vocation dream. Manaschīs often have dreams in which they see parts of the story, or in which they are visited by the spirits of characters from the Manas. I witnessed this a number of times when I stayed at the house of Talantaalī Bakchiev. The whole family and I would sleep in the living room of the two-room apartment, in a so-called *tōshiük*, the Kyrgyz bed that consists of many layers of blankets made up by the women every night and put aside every morning. In the middle of the night, Talant's wife, his children and I would wake up if Talantaalī suddenly started to chant. His dream recitals were very powerful, both in words and melody, and according to his wife Ainura, the story he told was always new. During his singing, Talantaalī remained

asleep. The next morning, he would tell us about a dream he had, and Ainura would say: 'Yes, we know, you sang about it.' Ainura told me she had often thought of recording Talant's night sessions, because they were even more beautiful than his waking recitals. However, she said that no matter what she tried, she never succeeded in recording them: the battery of the recorder would be dead, the tape would break. This led Ainura to assume that the spirits do not want these sessions to be recorded.

Dream inspiration was the way by which Talantaalī received the information for his episode of the memorial feast for Manas. This episode had never been told before, and Talantaalī was looking forward to the presentation of this 'scoop' at the National Manaschī Competition in Bishkek in August 1999. However, he came home deeply disappointed. The jury had scolded him for being presumptuous and pretentious. They were appalled that a young Manaschī like him dared to tell a story 'that does not exist'.

At another occasion, Talantaalī and I visited my host family in Kazıbek after we had participated in a Manas conference in Narın. Kazıbek is close to an archaeological site called *Koshoi Korgon*, which is identified as the old fortress of Manas' friend Khan Koshoi. The first night we stayed in Kazıbek, Talantaalī burst out in recital about Koshoi. The next morning he told me that the spirit of Khan Koshoi had come to visit him and told him many things about the Manas. Talantaalī was deeply impressed by this meeting with Koshoi and 'read *Kuran*' to honour this.

Great Manaschī Kaba Atabekov speaks of a trance (using the Russian word *trans*) during recitals rather than nightly dreams that he uses for day-time recitals. He enters a trance and the story reveals itself to him like a movie in front of his eyes. The trance comes easiest when there are a lot of people present. After one of the recitals that he held for me so I might record them, I asked Kaba where the words came from. Kaba replied: 'Well, we don't know that, do we, where words come from. They are suddenly there.' 'You have a great talent,' I said, to which Kaba responded with a smile: 'Yes, a great talent!' This shy man was openly content with his talent, a clear sign that Kaba truly sees his talent as a gift rather than an achievement of his own. Later, Kaba enthusiastically told me about another source of his words. He had visited a clairvoyant lady (*köz achik*) in a village close to Törtkül to heal him from his sore legs. The lady told Kaba that she had seen him on TV giving a recital. She had seen a snake (*jılang*) curled around his belly with its head on Kaba's right shoulder, whispering the words in his good ear<sup>60</sup>. During the healing session

---

<sup>60</sup> Kaba has a hearing aid for his left ear.

the snake was also present, and the lady had to pull her hand back when it hissed at her. Kaba told me he had never known about this snake; 'I see Manas in front of me when I recite!', he said. Dreams are also important for Kaba. One morning as I came to breakfast, Kaba was telling his wife what he had dreamt that night. He told her that he had seen Manas and Almambet. His wife was impressed and very interested in every detail. She ended the conversation by saying: 'Our forefathers were truly good people!'

Another Manaschī, Azat, experiences Manas reciting in a very distinct way. Azat was sixteen years old when I met him in Bishkek. I had been introduced to him by an American student who met Azat at a university course. The American student had warned me that Azat could be 'dangerous', although she never elaborated on this warning. She only mentioned how once he had run up to a light bulb, grabbed it and shouted: 'Now I have got the Power!' When Azat and I met, he explained that he started to tell the Manas in 1994, when in his village competitions were organised for schoolchildren as preparation for the 'Manas 1,000' celebrations. He won the competition at his school and was invited to go to Talas, but family trouble stopped him from going. It took a while before Azat opened up and told me about his fits of Manas recitals, when he locks himself into his room and keeps reciting for hours or days on end. He cannot stop himself and people around him wonder if he has gone crazy. Azat recited a small part for me, but he was afraid to fall into one of his fits and stopped after five minutes.

### 2.2.3 Apprenticeship

Despite the heavy focus on inspiration, most Manaschīs also speak of an apprenticeship with a Great Manaschī. Kaba Atabekov mentions the years he spent with Mambet Chokmorov, a Great Manaschī from his area who was thirty years older than Kaba. For two years<sup>61</sup> they travelled the summer pastures (*jailoo*) together. In the documentary *The Last Manaschi* Kaba gives a description of their Manas sessions. Mambet used to start the performance and recite until the meat that was being cooked was ready. Then he called Kaba and ordered him to take over until Mambet had eaten his fill. After that, Mambet continued the recital. The setting conjured up by Kaba is that of a yurt (*boz üy*) where a crowd has gathered to listen and eat a sheep or horse that is slaughtered for the occasion. Kaba does not speak of training sessions or any other form of textual or performance

---

<sup>61</sup> Kaba-ata told me he spent two years with Mambet. In the booklet *Manaschī Mambet Chokmorov (Commemoration) 100*, Kaba is quoted to say he spend one month travelling with Mambet (Akmataliev, 1996:23).

supervision. It seems that Kaba learnt from Mambet by spending time with him and hearing his recitals.

In the booklet that describes Mambet's life story, there is no mention at all of apprenticeship for Mambet himself. B. Sadikov merely mentions that the grandfather on Mambet's mother's side was a Manaschī as well and that Mambet heard the Manas from his mouth.

In the time I spent with Kaba, I never saw him engage in any teaching activities. When I asked Kaba about it, he said he had helped a few children to prepare for a school Manaschī contest in Cholpon Ata, where he accompanied them. In the documentary *The Last Manaschi* Kaba is filmed at the local primary school, where he listens to schoolchildren reciting the Manas and gives them directions on how to use hand gestures and tells them the right verse to start a recital. The verses recited by the children are not their own improvisations, but parts from the version of Sagimbai Orozbekov. It seems more than likely to me that this teaching session was staged to provide the film directors with what they were looking for. One reason for this assessment is that during my time in Törtkül, I never saw Kaba going to the school to teach Manas. The second reason is that when I visited schools in several places, I was often treated to a performance of some sort, and just as often denied permission to observe an ordinary lesson. Whether the movie directors were aware that their presence might have been the motor behind Kaba's Manas lesson is not clear to me.

The other Great Manaschī, Shaabai Azizov had been the mentor of two of my Manaschī informants. Kaniimbübü Abraimova, the female Manaschī from Kazibek, told me that at Lake İssikköl I could find the Great Manaschī Shaabai Azizov. He knew a lot about Manas, and he was the one who asked her to tell the Manas and heal people with the power (*kasiyet*) of Manas. Shaabai taught her how to do both correctly. Also Talantaalī Bakchiev pointed out Shaabai Azizov as his mentor. Talantaalī gave me more detailed information about the contents of his mentor-apprentice relationships. Shaabai lived in a village close to Talantaalī, and Talantaalī used to go over and sit with his mentor at his house. During these sessions, Shaabai taught Talantaalī which parts he could recite for what audience, because every episode has its own magical influence and one cannot recite each part for just anyone. Shaabai also educated Talantaalī in the correct manner of behaviour. A Manaschī deals with high powers and in order to protect himself from the wrath of Manas, he should not drink alcohol, lie or slander, but should live purely (*taza jür*). A Manaschī

who does not behave correctly can be punished by the spirit of Manas by death or by losing his mind.

At a students' conference in Bishkek, Talantaalī recounted that when he was a child, he had once asked Shaabai to teach him how to tell the Manas. Shaabai had then said to him: 'No, I shall not teach you now. If I do, you will never become a Manaschī. You have to learn it yourself when you get older'. Talantaalī explained me that even later, Shaabai could not teach him the words of a recital, because the text comes by itself.

Talantaalī said:

I think the spirits (*arbaktar*) send it. I also do not really understand it myself. But I am surprised when I hear my own recitals. 'Did I recite this?', I think. Sometimes I do not even know what words I have recited. I can't explain it.

Talantaalī also said he was greatly influenced by the Manaschī Sayakbai. He has LP records of Sayakbai's recitals and had frequently observed him being broadcast on television and in films. Talantaalī especially enjoys Sayakbai's passionate articulation and melodies. But the most important reason for Talantaalī to see Sayakbai as his mentor is that Sayakbai has appeared to him in dreams after Talant's first calling dream, where he taught Talantaalī much about how to recite the Manas properly.

In May 1999, Talantaalī invited me to watch a Manas lesson he gave to one of his nephews. The lesson took place in a classroom of the Meerim Manas school, a school that was opened with the intention of preserving the tradition of oral performance. This specific lesson was not officially scheduled. Talantaalī did not receive any wages for it, as he taught the lesson on his own initiative. The pupil was a young, shy boy. Talantaalī explained him that he had to tell the Manas powerfully (*küchtüüi*). The conversation went as follows:

Talantaalī: When telling the Manas, you have to express that the Spirit of Manas exists. You become a different person. Just like Shaabai and Kaba, they become different persons when they tell the Manas. That is because you tell the words of the Hero (*Aiköl*). Where do opera singers get their voice from? From practice, and from God, from nature. Did you hear yourself on tape? What did it sound like?

Pupil: Small... (*kichke*)

Talantaalī: Yes. When you sit down to tell, you have to sit large and free. And once you're inside the story, you forget your posture. Now, remember to start from the earth (*jer*), the earth is your mother. Then you go to the sky (*asman*), like this: heeeeeeee! Now you start.

*Pupil recites.*

Talantaalī: This won't do at all!! (*Takir bolboi jatat!*) Open your mouth!!

Pronounce everything clearly, almost exaggeratedly. Do not show your teeth, but open your mouth, because otherwise your voice disappears. Now start again at the new part you have learnt by heart. From the earth, through you, through your belly, through your mouth it goes to the sky.

In this session, Talantaalī gave a lot more feedback on the actual art of reciting than he and others had told me about. Interestingly though, he did not intervene in the actual poetry, gave no comments on the words, the rhyme or the story line. Later on, Talantaalī told me that the words the boy used were learnt from a book. This would have made it unnecessary to focus on the poetry itself.

This Manas lesson was the only one I witnessed during two years of fieldwork.

#### 2.2.3.1 Manaschī School

The Manas Encyclopaedia mentions one or more mentors for almost every Manaschī. At times, there is even mention of a Manaschī School (*Manaschilar Mektebi*). In the article that describes this phenomenon, S. Begaliev and R. Sarīpbekov make clear that this is a term used in 'folklore studies'. However, they caution the reader to be careful with this term:

**Manaschī School.** Narrators of a famous epic who influence one another artistically and train apprentices, with the students' output being versions close to one another, almost similar, and a group of narrators who own a substantial difference with the versions of others, are called narrators school in folklore studies. (...) In his time, M. Auezov marked out the Narīn and Karakol schools. Indeed, if one compares versions of the Manas epic, it is possible to find a number of schools. Sagīmbai Orozbek Uulu's version is close to that of Shapak, Bagīsh, Togolok Moldo and Moldobasan, the version of Sayakbai Karala Uulu is close to the version of Mambet, Dunkana, Shaabai, Kaba and others. But one has to be careful to state that a Manaschī belongs to this or that school. Because every Manaschī's version has characteristics of both this and that school (ME II:77).

It may be possible to find certain patterns of similarity and difference between the versions of various Manaschīs, and group them together in what can be seen as schools, merely for scholarly desk purposes. However, when these patterns are extended to map contact between Manaschīs and are used to point out deliberate or unintentional mutual

influencing, the concept of schools becomes problematic. In the present-day situation, Manaschīs do not group themselves into schools and do not actively seek to work more with certain Manaschīs than with others. Certainly, there are networks of loyalty and interaction, but these are far more complex than the concept of schools can cover. Interaction between Manaschīs most often takes place at national competitions and commemoration festivals. Here, Manaschīs meet their colleagues from all over the country, create loyalties and dislikes and listen to many different recitals. Interaction on a national level was more frequent during my fieldwork than interaction on a regional level. At these national gatherings, the Manaschīs were aware of who is from Narīn, Īssikköl, Talas or Osh, because regional loyalties play a large role in Kyrgyzstan's society overall. This does not mean, however, that the form of their Manas recitals comes out in versions that can be grouped along the lines of regional or 'guru' schools, either in form or content.

The most important reason to discard the concept of Manaschī schools is the fact that Manaschīs themselves do not use it. A school can only be a school in the sense of a social unit when it is perceived as such by the participants. In the new era of independent Kyrgyzstan, there has been an attempt to institutionalise Manaschī training. In March 1999, a Manas School opened in Bishkek. The aim of this school was to 'acquaint the children of the world with the Manas epic'<sup>62</sup> and was sponsored by the Meerim Charity Foundation, a development organisation headed by Mairam Akayeva, the wife of president Akayev.

The official opening of the school was an important event for Talantaalī, as it marked his recognition as a Manaschī. Many famous Manaschīs were present, among whom Kaba Atabekov and Shaabai Azizov. At the opening, many speeches were held by scholars and politicians. A number of videos were presented including the documentary *The Last Manaschi* about Kaba Atabekov, which I had brought on the request of the Dutch filmmakers. The pupils at the school were taught by Manaschīs who live in Bishkek, Talantaalī being one of them. For a meagre salary he taught a small number of children after school hours. Talantaalī explained that the teaching method of the school was to make children learn parts of written versions by heart. The school had chosen to not only allow dream-called youngsters but anyone who wanted to become acquainted with the Manas epic. Talantaalī could therefore not work in what he considers the right way: help children to handle the inspiration they receive from the spirits. After a while, Talantaalī gave up his

---

<sup>62</sup> In the words of Talantaalī Bakchiev.



job at the Manas School. Later, he told me that his nephew, who he had taught in the manner of the Manas School, had given up Manas recital. He said:

I had already felt he would do that at that time. You see, if he never received a dream or any other sign of the spirits, he cannot be a Manaschī, not even a Manaschī who learns by heart. I don't know why, but this is a fact.

This top-down attempt to institutionalise the learning process started out enthusiastically, but has meanwhile ceased to exist. The primary factor that brought an end to the school was the loss of its main sponsor, the Meerim Charity Foundation. When president Akayev was ousted in March 2005, the Meerim Foundation that was led by his wife also ended its activities.

Talantaali Bakchiev himself also harbours the idea of creating a Manaschī school, but his school is to have a very contrasting ideology. He envisions a boarding school for youngsters who have had a vocation dream. They will take lessons in the usual subjects such as history, language and mathematics. Their Manaschī classes will focus on correct behaviour. The children will be required to learn how to behave properly and how to deal with the strong energy triggered by their relationship with Manas. Talantaali asked my help to find financial aid for this idea, and we set off to design a project proposal that European NGOs might be interested to support financially. We agreed that our chances for funding would be higher if we changed his initial idea into a travelling Manas theatre group of experienced and young Manaschīs who travel to cities, towns and villages together and give recitals in club houses during summer months. During those travels, there would be enough time to teach the children. In Bishkek, a Swiss NGO expressed considerable interest in the idea. Unfortunately, our contact person, a young Kyrgyz woman, moved to Switzerland, and no-one in the organisation was equally interested in our idea. As I fell ill soon afterwards, the search for funds ceased and the idea was put aside.

#### 2.2.4 Comparing with Parry and Lord

With the above information in mind, it might be interesting to compare the genesis of a Manaschī to that of the oral performers in Milman Parry and Albert Lord's famous study of oral literature in Yugoslavia. This study remains the standard work on processes of oral composition and is used as such by literature scholars who work on historic epic poetry that was written down but originated from an oral tradition.

After Milman Parry passed away, his assistant Albert Lord published their findings in his book *The Singer of Tales*<sup>63</sup>. In this book, Lord identifies three stages in the process of a young person becoming an oral performer. The first stage is that of listening and absorbing (Lord, 2000:21):

During the first period he sits aside while others sing. He has decided he wants to sing himself, or he may still be unaware of his decision and simply be very eager to hear the stories of his elders. Before he actually begins to sing, he is, consciously or unconsciously, laying the foundation. He is learning the stories and becoming acquainted with the heroes and their names, the faraway places and the habits of long ago. The themes of the poetry are becoming familiar to him, and his feeling for them is sharpened as he hears more and as he listens to the men discussing the songs themselves. At the same time he is imbibing the rhythm of the singing and to an extent also the rhythm of the thoughts as they are expressed in song. Even at this early stage the oft-repeated phrases we call formulas are being absorbed (ibid.).

The second stage that Lord discerns is the period of application. The singer tries out his singing and works on ways to fit thought to rhythmic pattern:

He is like a child learning words, or anyone learning a language without a school method; except the language here being learned is the special language of poetry. This is the period in which the teacher is most important (ibid.:22) (...) Learning in this second stage is a process of imitation, both in regard to playing the instrument and to learning the formulas and themes of the tradition. It may truthfully be said that the singer imitates the techniques of composition of his master or masters rather than particular songs (ibid.:24).

The third stage begins when:

the singer is competent to sing one song all the way through for a critical audience. (...) He has arrived at a definite turning point when he can sit in front of an audience and finish a song to his own satisfaction and that of the audience (ibid.). (...) His audience is gradually changing from an attitude of condescension toward the youngster to one of accepting him as a singer (ibid.:25).

Lord has described the situation of the Yugoslav singers in his study as prototypical, as if his observations can be applied to oral composers all over the world. He does not seem to leave any room for regional or historical variation and has repeatedly been criticised for

---

<sup>63</sup> The *Singer of Tales* was first published in 1960 and re-edited for a second publication in 2000.

this. In Kyrgyzstan, the situation also differs from Lord's study in several aspects, and most notably in the area of training the singer. It is very likely that for Manaschīs there is a stage of 'listening and absorbing' as well. Manaschīs who have been brought up in the time of radio and TV broadcasts cannot have escaped Manas recitals and must have been influenced by them. Nowadays, children learn parts of a book version of the Manas by heart, helped by their teachers to perform in a true-to-life Manaschī recital style.

Manaschīs who lived before the age of writing, radio and TV also very likely have heard recitals at social gatherings. However, the Manaschīs I met or read about never mentioned the recitals of other Manaschīs as a formative influence. Only Manaschī Abdīrakhmanov explicitly points at the importance of listening and absorbing in the process of becoming a Manaschī. In the Manas Encyclopaedia he is quoted to have said:

When I was 7 – 8 years old, I was educated along with other village children by the mullah (*moldo*). In the winter camp of the village (*aiil*) young and old would gather to discuss Manas telling, they would invite people who could tell the story (*jomok*) of Manas and recite in turn every night. When twilight fell, the room was packed with a mix of young and old passing on Manas tales. The big boys sat in front of me, I was left leaning at the doorpost on the threshold of the yurt. Half-way the night I could get closer, when the older boys became tired and left. Close to day-break I too told stories, and I left only after the meat was served. Thus I spent many winter days passing on the Manas. When I told some sad parts, people would cry... When I came to parts about battles, horse-races, shooting and fights, some people would shout, the others would cheer. The same with the tale of Semetei... Some episodes of the story that was told in the night would capture my mood. The next day the people believed that I would become a storyteller (*jomokchu*) based on how I had been telling (ME II:353).

Although most Manaschīs do not mention the influence of listening and absorbing the recitals of others, this does not mean that this process was not a part of their formation. The emphasis on a direct calling by Manas seems to have placed a taboo on any other influence other than Manas' inspiration itself. The fact that Manas recitals have many similarities, both performance-based and textual, clearly points to the mutual influencing of Manaschīs. Although the first stage described by Lord is not recognised as such by Manaschīs, it may well be maintained.

For Manaschīs, the calling is a clear and separate stage. Lord hints at a 'decision that he wants to become a singer himself' - a decision that may be conscious or

unconscious at the time the singer starts to absorb songs and styles. In the life stories of Manaschīs, that decision is the starting point of everything – but it is not a decision made by the singer him- or herself. It are the spirits of Manas or his comrades, who decide. This may be interpreted as an unconscious decision, or as a specific manifestation of an artistic desire. It may also be interpreted exactly as it is presented by the Manaschīs: an inescapable order of the spirits.

Lord's second stage begins when an oral performer-to-be begins training under the guidance of a specialist. As I have shown in the previous section, it is by no means clear how this has happened and happens today in the Manas context. The fact that I have witnessed only one training sessions is telling in itself, but I cannot exclude the importance of one-on-one training in a mentor-apprentice relationship. For Manaschīs, the training will frequently commence when they recite the Manas to themselves, out in the fields where no-one can hear them. This often satisfies their own enjoyment in singing the epic, until they experience coercion from the spirits to recite in public. Now they have to overcome their shyness and show what they know.

Lord's final stage starts when a singer has told his first tale in full to the satisfaction of himself and his audience. As is clear from his book, Lord recognises that the development of a singer does not stop after this first song, and he might have explored more stages if he had covered the entire career of a successful singer. Lord's categorisation was meant to merely describe the stages of a student singer. He does not explicate within his study in Yugoslavia, whether the third stage is recognised as such by the singers themselves, and neither does he speak of a ritual or ceremonial first performance. This leads me to conclude that Lord himself created this marker for professional maturity. Manaschīs, however, often do mention a ceremonial first performance. Usually, the first time a Manaschī recites is right after the calling dream, sometimes when they are still asleep. This event is often followed by a period of reluctance to recite in public. After this, most Manaschīs speak of a ceremonial performance that leads to their social recognition. They recite to an audience of respected people, usually elders (*ak sakaldar, abushkalar*), who bless the Manaschī (*bata berüü*) and wish him well. Apprenticeship, which in Lord's description precedes social recognition, comes after the official initiation of a Manaschī. In many years to follow, the Manaschī will build up his or her reputation, in rare cases eventually leading to the status of Great Manaschī (*Chong Manaschī*).

For Manaschīs then, an ideal-typical set of stages that covers a majority of personal experiences would look like this:

- 1      Listening and absorbing
- 2      Vocation dream
- 3      Self-teaching in lonely outdoor places
- 4      First public performance, followed by blessings
- 5      Apprenticeship with mentor Manaschī
- 6      Independent recitals at social gatherings and competitions

It is interesting to note that S. Musaev, one of Kyrgyzstan's most esteemed Manas scholars, described four stages in Manaschīhood in which the calling dream has no place at all. As we have seen before, Musaev played down the importance of the vocation dream in 1979, entirely in tune with the positivist tradition of Soviet academia. As Musaev leaves out the concept of a calling dream that leads to immediate fluency in reciting, his four stages are significantly more similar to Lord's. Musaev speaks of the beginner (*üirönchük*) Manaschī, who works closely with experienced narrators and learns 'professional secrets, performance ways and methods, in addition to various expressive devices, memorizing separate epic verses and even rather lengthy fragments' (Musaev translated in Aliev et.al.,1995:285). The second stage is that of rhapsode (*chala*) Manaschī, when a Manaschī performs parts that he has learnt by heart. Many Manaschīs remain in this stage, and although these Manaschīs do not contribute to the evolution of the epic, they are important in popularising the epic. Musaev's third stage is that of real (*chīnīgī*) Manaschī. Musaev describes the 'master-narrators' from this stage as follows:

The performance of the epic is their sole occupation, they consider it their profession, and, therefore, they think it their professional duty to know all the epic events in their traditional succession, from the beginning to the end. The narrators-masters create their own epic versions (ibid.:285).

The final stage is that of the great (*chong*) Manaschī. These are the few narrators with extreme talent in improvisation and epic creation.

Musaev's description contradicts my fieldwork experiences on three occasions. First of all, I did not hear of any occasions where a beginner Manaschī learnt parts of the epic by heart from an experienced Manaschī. Even if the one-on-one training remained hidden from me behind the veil of dream-inspiration, the image of such detailed training seems too distant from my experiences to be plausible. Secondly, 'rhapsode' and 'real' Manaschīs were separate categories in my fieldwork, and not stages that all Manaschīs

went through. The real (i.e. the dream-inspired) Manaschīs never learned parts of others by heart. The image can be upheld, however, when we follow Lord's explanation that singers do not speak from a literate point of view when they say that they repeat a song word by word. Oral performance is fluid by nature. It is only the possibility of recording that makes concepts as 'word by word' and 'learning by heart' static. Present-day Manaschīs are not illiterate, and they are familiar with and even work with different forms of recording. It is possible that for the Manaschīs of Musaev's study, and maybe for Musaev as well, the image of 'learning by heart' is still not meant as literal and static as one might assume. Thirdly, all Great Manaschīs I knew or heard about had other occupations next to their Manaschīhood, usually being farmers. This difference may be due to an alternate understanding of concepts altogether. It is likely that for Musaev it is so obvious that every person works on their farms or with their flocks, that his claim that Great Manaschīs see narrating as their sole profession does not exclude their working on a farm. On the other hand, the Great Manaschī of Musaev's time, Sayakbai Karalaev, may indeed have been a full-time Manaschī. Musaev tells us Sayakbai was a shepherd before he joined the Red Army in 1918. When he came home in 1922, he became the chairman of the Soviet village. In 1935, he became the professional Manaschī of the *Philharmonia* in Bishkek (ibid.:288), and it is possible that at this time, Manas narrating was his sole occupation. Nowadays, no Manaschī can survive on reciting alone.

### **2.3 Manaschīs and Energy**

From the above, it is clear that Manaschīs are closely related to the supernatural world. Not only are they in close contact with ancestor spirits and animal guardian spirits themselves, they are also interlocutors between the supernatural world and their audience. A talented Manaschī brings his audience into an appreciated state of immersion within the story and a sense of proximity to the ancestors. He is thus both artist and spiritual professional. He provides amusement and an escape from daily life, but more than that he creates an atmosphere where people can feel connected to their forefathers. This connection is not only experienced in a symbolic sense of being re-acquainted with one's roots through the images of the past. This connection is experienced as real contact, and is felt through actual bodily sensations.

John D. Niles calls the phenomenon of bodily sensations that are conjured up by narrating 'somatic communication' (Niles, 1999:53). Although in his various examples bodily sensations are not interpreted as expressions of spiritual contact, Niles holds that

somatic communication forms the main component of oral performance. It is this form of communication that distinguishes oral performance from the reading of a text:

...oral performance has a corporality about it, a sensible, somatic quality, that derives from the bodily presence of performers and listeners. The collaborative aspect of oral performance goes far beyond the meeting of minds that, after all, must occur even with literature that is composed to be read by someone else, perhaps a stranger, in some unknown time or place. Literature that is performed aloud in a traditional setting depends on a visible, audible, olfactory, and sometimes tactile connection between performers and their audiences. This point is worth emphasizing because literary scholars sometimes approach such an event as if its sole importance were to furnish editors with texts (ibid.).

In Manas performance too, somatic communication plays an important role. I personally experienced the impact of recitals by goose bumps on my skin, deepening of my breath, and a bodily sense of concentration, when every fibre in my body focussed on the chant. These phenomena occurred long before I could understand even a few words of the text, and were shared by a number of my European friends who witnessed Manas recitals. Also a Russian student who heard Talantaali recite said afterwards: 'This was the first time I heard a Manaschi, and I loved it. I could feel the energy!'

During Kaba Atabekov's private recitals that he held for me in their guest room, I often experienced forms of somatic communication. At times they were invoked by what Niles terms tactile connections. Kaba often held my hand during these recitals, or he slapped me on the back. Sometimes he stared in the distance and addressed his recitals to eternity, but at other times he looked at me and said 'my child' (*balam*) at the end of his verses. However, most of my somatic reactions were invoked by his voice and expression. In my research diary I wrote the following passage:

After a while the full force of his recital surfaced (or did I only then open up for it?), and it almost hurt my ears... It was so powerful. I can really understand how a Manas recital can work as a cure – it pervades the entire body. Wow!

At another moment Kaba's recital was so intense that his angry expression actually invoked bodily reactions of fear in me. One particular day, when Kaba recited about the death of many of Manas' knights (*choro*), he stopped and said: 'Now I am crying. I will stop now, because otherwise you will start crying too, and what will we do then?'

Talantaali also recognises the effect of somatic communication during recitals. As a narrator, he himself experiences many somatic effects of reciting. One day, after a recital

for a group of students at the International University in Karakol, I saw him walk away from the crowd. His face was covered in sweat, his eyes were staring at the floor and his walk was unsteady. He was obviously in a state of mind from which he needed time and distance to recover.

For Talantaalī, ‘energies’ (*energia, kasiet*) are crucial in the process of somatic communication. During a recital, both narrator and listener can enter a state in which they become one with nature and where they can pick up information from the other world. It is the energy of the other world that touches the body of the reciter or listener. On one of the first days after Talantaalī and I had met, I realised how important the concept of energies is for Talantaalī. In the morning, we went to Lake İssikköl in a minibus. We got off near a sign that told foreigners not to pass, but as the near-by marine bomb factory was no longer in use, we took the chance. We walked around the shore, and at some point, Talantaalī squatted down, touched the water and appeared to pray or meditate. When we came back to his home, he wanted to give a recital for me and Timothy Scott, my American friend who was making a documentary on the Manas. Talantaalī told us that he was filled with energy from the lake and that he wanted to release it. Furthermore, the evening is a good time for recital because the sky (*asman*) is clearer than in the day time, he said. There is less biological activity, which helps to find a clear connection with the spirits. However, the recital did not go as well as he had hoped and he pointed at his two-year old daughter who had been very restless during the recital. ‘Biological activity!’, he laughed.

In the legends about ancient Manaschīs, healing plays an important role. The recitals of Manaschīs such as Keldibek are said to have cured the ill and made barren couples fertile. During my fieldwork, I have not encountered any Manas performances with the specific aim to heal, and neither did the Manaschīs that I met claim they performed healing recital sessions. However, the connection of the female Manaschī Kanımbübü with the spirits of Manas and his companions added to her powers and legitimacy as a healer.

The energies of the Manas are associated with both healing power and the power to harm. Talantaalī claims he has never been to hospital because of the high energies of the Manas. He hesitated to bring me in contact with his mentor Shaabai because of his energies, and when we finally met, Talantaalī was shocked by how docile (*joosh*) I became in Shaabai’s presence. I merely remember being the silent anthropological listener, although in my diary I do find that the next day I was upset by all the stories of energies, evil eye and other supernatural things. They had become part of my conceptual framework



for social interaction with Kyrgyz people, but I had not learned to manage them well enough to feel agency and personal influence with the supernatural.

Kaba Atabekov is also considered to be a person with high energies. One day, Kaba, Tim and I went to Manjili Mazar, a holy place where, according to Kaba, Manas and his wife Khanikey had come to ask for fertility. They spent a night at the *mazar*, hoping for and receiving a dream that would foretell a baby. The day we arrived, a bus full of people from the nearby town Bökönbaev was having a meal under a tree at the *mazar*. The people were all ill or barren and had come with an old female healer (*talip*) to pray. A number of them intended to spend the night there, hoping for a healing dream. When the group realised that the Great Manaschi Kaba had arrived, they asked us to join them, hoping that Kaba would recite the Manas for them. Kaba recited, and all listened silently and in fascination. A number of women had closed their eyes. After about twenty minutes the attention of the crowd faded, and people started to murmur. Kaba went on for a little while, but then he ended the recital by saying '*deit*' (it is said) to the man sitting next to him. Kaba then read *Kuran* and after his '*Omin*' (amen) we had the boiled mutton called *bash barmak* with the rice dish *plov*. Probably, most people in the group counted themselves lucky that Kaba had been present. His appearance will have been a good omen for many. Another day at Kaba's home, a very strange situation occurred when I came to the kitchen for breakfast tea. A man with a Kyrgyz hat (*kalpak*) and flashy sunglasses was sitting at the table and mumbled to Kaba about Manas, Semetei and Seitek. He said he had been ill for ten years because of his Manas recitals. The man was from At-Bashi, the Narin town next to the hill Chech-döbö that is considered the burial place of Manas' best friend Almambet. He read *Kuran*, asked for matches for his cigarette and as he left he said he would come back the next day. Kaba and his wife were just as puzzled as I was by this man's presence. Suddenly Kaba's wife discovered that he had left a piece of paper on the wall, just above the kitchen spoons. The man had also given them an orange powder that he dissolved in water for them to drink. When Kaba's wife threw this out in the garden, the grass turned yellow. The next time the man came over, he said he wanted Kaba's blessings (*bata*) for his Semetei recital, and wanted to go for a walk with Kaba. Kaba said his feet hurt, and told the man not to come back again. Things like this did not happen often, Kaba's wife told me, although every now and then people come by with their own questions.

For many of my informants, the tale of Manas is imbedded in a complex of dreams, interactions, healing and harming that is conveyed through energy (*energia*, *kasiet*). The

transmission of this energy is not confined to the moment of performance, but pervades all spheres of life. The Manas is there, whether one hears the tale or not.

## 2.4 Different Manaschīs, different versions

There are two figures of speech used by Manaschīs and their audiences that can confuse an outsider with an inclination to interpret them in the context of written literature. The first is the use of *the* Manas as if it is a fixed text. Actually, neither Kyrgyz nor Russian use articles (the/a), but the expression ‘*Manasta aitilat*’ (it is told in Manas) still sounds as if the Manas is a story with a fixed plot. If this expression is followed by a quote, it even suggests a tale of fixed wordings. The other figure of speech that creates confusion about the flexibility of the epic is ‘the version of Manaschī X’. This expression may easily give the impression that every Manaschī has a complete story line stored in his memory, a complete version that does not expand or evolve over time.

The oral performance of an elaborate story like the Manas, however, has very different dynamics from the writing of such a tale. The most obvious difference lies in the fact that a written tale is the result of a composition at a certain moment in time. Although this moment may last for weeks or even years, once the writing has ceased, the story will have exactly the same words every time it is read. In oral performance, composition happens in two different ways. A story teller may have learnt the story or song by heart and use the same words each time he tells the story. Singers in other parts of the world have been reported to reproduce epic songs word by word. John D. Smith, for instance, describes the similarities in performances of the Pājūbī epic sung by singers of the Nāyak caste in Rājasthān, India. He comes to the conclusion that this epic, which takes on average twelve hours to recite, is an orally composed, but fixed text (Smith, 1977:144, 150). In contrast, the Manas is no such fixed song. Of course, so-called *jattama Manaschilar* (‘imprint Manaschīs’) do indeed learn parts written down from other narrators by heart and reproduce them as precisely as they can, but *chīnīgī Manaschilar* (‘real Manaschīs’) compose the story while they recite. For them, every recital is a moment of composition. The creative skill that is drawn upon in this case inevitably, and often obligatory, leads to the use of different words or even different story lines in every performance. Secondly, the dynamics of oral performance differ from a written text as a result of the time between the creation and consumption of the story. Whereas the author of a written story has all the time to ponder every word and plot line that he or she needs, the oral performer has only a split second to choose his words. Milman Parry and Albert Lord

have shown how formulae (certain combinations of words or grammar structures that reoccur throughout the recital) are indispensable tools in this form of on-the-spot composition. In the *Manas*, the use of formulae is abundant.

Although *Manaschi*s and their audiences can speak of the *Manas* as if it is a fixed story, they know that every *Manaschi* has his or her own version. Comparative analysis has made clear that differences between these versions can be considerable. Even among the tales told by contemporaries Sayakbai and Sagımbai one can find major plot differences. Kyrgyzstani *Manas* scholar K. Rakhmatullin compared these versions on the topics of battle episodes and what he calls ‘every day life events’. The most striking differences mentioned by Rakhmatullin are the end of battles: Sagımbai often depicts a moment of surrender where Sayakbai describes bloody battles to the death. The battle with the Kitai enemy Alookey in Andizhan (see paragraph 1.4.5), for instance, ends in Sagımbai’s version when Alookey is so impressed with *Manas*’ appearance that he surrenders. Alookey gives *Manas* expensive presents and when *Manas* has moved on to fight another khan, Alookey flees to Bei-jin. Sayakbai, however, tells that Alookey gathers all his gold and jewels when he hears that *Manas* is after him and takes off for Bei-jin. *Manas* finds them on their flight and kills Alookey and all his men one by one (Rakhmatullin translated in Aliev et.al., 1995:298).

There are many more of these situations where both *Manaschi*s describe the same event in very different and conflicting ways. In the category daily life events, Rakhmatullin points at very different versions of how *Manas* met his wife Khanıkey. Sagımbai’s version is described in paragraph 1.4.5 of this book, and tells that *Manas*’ father Jakıp finds Khanıkey on a bride search for his son. There are tensions that relate to the unwillingness to give Khanıkey to *Manas*, *Manas*’ anger of the lack of hospitality and a physical fight between *Manas* and Khanıkey, but in the end they marry and everyone is happy. Sayakbai’s story is completely different. Firstly in his version, it is not Jakıp who first encounters Khanıkey, but Chubak, one of *Manas*’ closest knights. Long before *Manas* had even heard of Khanıkey, Chubak went to Bukhara to demand Khanıkey as his bride. Unfortunately for him, Chubak failed to claim her. Later, when he hears that *Manas* needs another wife, he tells him that Khanıkey may be the one for him. *Manas* goes to his father to ask him for a bride-price, but Jakıp refuses to give his son what he asked for. *Manas* is furious and goes to see Khanıkey anyway. Fortunately, Khanıkey’s father has had a dream that foretold that his daughter will marry *Manas*. The father agrees with the marriage, despite the lack of bride-price. Also in Sayakbai’s version, a quarrel between Khanıkey and *Manas* erupts where she puts him to the test, but *Manas* also has a test for Khanıkey.

He has a puppy that he wants her to take care of. When the puppy burns his tail in the fire, Manas gets angry, beats Khanikey and refuses to marry her. According to Rakhmatullin, this is where Sayakbai's version ends, but as we know from Sayakbai's vocation dream, he does recognise Khanikey as Manas' wife, and it is more than likely that Sayakbai has told a different ending of the betrothal story on other occasions.

I do not know of any textual research that has been conducted on the possible differences between the versions of one single Manaschī. This would be very interesting as it could change the way Manas scholars speak of '*the* version of this-or-that Manaschī'. Parry and Lord's study in Yugoslavia has shown that although epic songs often vary in wording and story line from one singer to the other, it is considerably less so when comparing the songs of one narrator over time. In one particular case, the similarity between a song recorded in 1934 and the same song recorded from the same singer 17 years later was amazing (Lord, 2000:69,70).

Versions of different Manaschīs do not only vary in the manner they portray certain events, there are also many occasions where a Manaschī tells about an event that no other Manaschī speaks of or even alludes to. Sagimbai, for instance, speaks of a march to Kashkar, two to Central Asia<sup>64</sup>, two marches to Afghanistan, a march to the North and to the West, and finally the Great March to Bei-jin. Sayakbai mentions only the Great March to Bei-jin as a full-scale battle<sup>65</sup>. Most notable, and often mentioned by my informants, is Manas' pilgrimage to Mecca which is only told by Sagimbai. Sayakbai does not refer to that anywhere, Talantaalī Bakchiev does not speak of it because he considers it an unauthentic element, and when I asked Kaba Atabekov about the difference in these two versions, he answered in chant: 'Manas never went there'.

The question arises as to how Manaschīs and their audiences negotiate the existence of different versions. At first sight, it seems contradictory to the belief that the information that Manaschīs relay comes straight from the spirits of Manas and his comrades. Following the inner logic of this belief, the spirits should surely know whether Manas went to Mecca or not. Although it might be possible that they have told only one Manaschī about the pilgrimage to Mecca, how can Kaba actually deny Manas ever went there? The answers Manaschīs gave me showed that the inner logic was slightly different. Kaba-*ata* merely

---

<sup>64</sup> This information comes from a study by Rakhmatullin, who does not explain the use of the term Central Asia. The questions this term raises are: did Sagimbai use the phrase himself, or has Rakhmatullin introduced it as a stepping stone? And was Manas' territory set within or outside of this 'Central Asia'? Did he march *within* or *to* Central Asia?

<sup>65</sup> Unfortunately, Rakhmatullin remains unclear once again. This information does not tell us if Sayakbai spoke of other marches that were perhaps less 'full-scale' battles.

expressed a surprising easiness, for immediately after his firm statement that Manas had never been to Mecca, he smiled at me when I asked why Sagımbai claimed otherwise and said: ‘You see, we all have our own versions, that’s no problem (*ech teke emes*)’.

Talantaalı, who is more explicit in his philosophical ponderings, explained that versions can vary because every Manaschı has a different imagination. Versions vary with the times, he explained, if for instance the Kyrgyz had not converted to Islam, there would not have been a word about Islam in the epic. He also gave the example of a Manaschı of the Soviet period, Almabek Toichubekov (1888-1969), who had studied in Moscow and was a strong believer of socialism. In his version, he spoke of a Manas’ Five Year Plan.

Talantaalı warned me not to interpret the word ‘imagination’ in a European way:

When I say imagination, I mean the state of mind that a narrator and his audience enter during a recital. You cannot really call it trance - it is rather a state where man and nature are one. The Manaschı is not just a mouthpiece for the spirits, but he is in contact with them. The Manaschı just gives words to his experience. Of course, every Manaschı does this differently, so there are different versions.

The social situation of a recital appears to influence the actual outcome. Narrators can adjust their recitals to their audiences, recitals can suffer or profit from the narrators’ mood, and recitals held for recording purposes have different dynamics and different outcomes from recitals for a live audience. In the case of the Soviet Union, there is another element that has to be taken into account when one wants to compare Manas versions, namely censorship. It is clear that the publications of recorded versions were censored (see chapter three), but unfortunately, I have no information on how censorship influenced the oral performance of the Manas epic.

The importance of Islam in the epic is a matter of special concern. It is generally believed that the Kyrgyz were converted to Islam relatively recently. Although Islam was introduced in Bukhara by the early eighth century, it was not until the turn of the nineteenth century that Islam gained some foothold amongst the nomads of Central Asia (van Leeuwen et.al., 1994:13). But even then, their knowledge of the Prophet and the K’uran was minimal (Chadwick and Zhirmunsky, 1969:5). In all the known versions of the Manas, however, Islam is one of the main rationales for warfare, next to rebellion against oppression and extortion. Furthermore, in the sixteenth century Farsi text *Majmu-at-Tavarikh* (which portrays Manas as a historical figure) Manas’ father is already called by the Muslim name Yakub-bek, which is very similar to the present-day Jakıp (ibid.:307). There are no known versions where Manas is not a Muslim. At present, Kaba Atabekov

also believes that Manas was a Muslim, but he also claims that Manas lived 5,000 years ago. I asked him how this was possible, since the prophet Mohammed lived in the sixth and seventh century. His answer was: “All the prophets came after Manas. God (*Kudai*) was there before Manas, but Manas came before the Prophets.” Talantaali Bakchiev, on his part, is convinced that the Islamic elements in the tales about Manas are not original, and he wishes to return to its more authentic base of Buddhism and shamanism.

Another point of variation which has been influenced by time is the ethnic map of the epic stories. As the ethnic map of the narrators and audiences changes, so does the ethnic map within the Manas. Interestingly, Manas was not Kyrgyz in the Manas poems that were recorded in the nineteenth century. Present-day Manaschīs are so committed to the idea of Manas being Kyrgyz that they could not believe me when I mentioned this, and they provided many alternative explanations for this ‘misunderstanding’. This issue will be dealt with in detail in chapter four.

## **2.5 Social Status of Manaschīs**

Manas scholars often state that Manaschīs are ‘highly respected’. This idea recurs in descriptions such as ‘the Kyrgyz epic narrators are highly esteemed by the people’ (Musaev translated in Aliev et.al., 1995:283), ‘the greatest of these masters became the objects of everybody’s veneration’ (Saliev translated in Aliev et.al, 1995:449), ‘and all spectators and listeners believed sincerely that a manaschi is not a simple mortal, but that his soul is inspired by a certain magical action of the hero Manas and his forty knights’ (Karipkulov translated in Aliev et.al., 1995:239). These texts have an aura of glorification, which can also be found in the official programme of the ‘Manas 1,000’ festival:

The talent of manaschis is an endowment having its own sacred mystery. Only a person, who had rich spiritual inner world, who knew aspirations of his people, their legends, tales, family-trees, traditions and customs, who had gift of certain mysterious, magic force, could be a genuine manaschi [sic] (Asankanov and Omurbekov, 1995).

Ethnomusicologist Alan P. Merriam has found that musicians are very often said to be ‘highly respected’ or ‘revered’ in their societies, but he argues that it is very difficult to tell precisely what is meant by ‘respect’ or ‘reverence’, and that the picture is probably much more complicated than it might appear (Merriam, 1964:134). The same holds for the actual position of Manaschīs. I witnessed a diversity of attitudes and treatments of Manaschīs.

When Damīra-*eje*<sup>66</sup>, a Kyrgyz language teacher at the International University of Kyrgyzstan, proposed to organise a meeting with the Great Manaschī Kaba Atabekov, she wanted me to promise that I would treat the old Manaschī with respect. To this day, I wonder why Damīra-*eje* felt the need to stress this numerous times. Was she afraid that I, as a young person, might not remember the proper way to treat elders? Was it because I was European and did she not trust foreigners to show appropriate respect to Manaschīs? Was it because Manaschīs are increasingly treated without respect and did she want to guard Kaba-*ata* from this? Or was she perhaps trying to tell me prudently that I should offer Kaba-*ata* financial compensation for his hospitality and time? Whatever the reason was, it is clear that for Damīra-*eje*, respect for Manaschīs from young, European anthropologists was not obvious.

A few days later, at a conference at the Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences, I was amazed by the lack of respect that students and scholars showed for a well-known Manaschī. The conference on the Manas epic was preceded by a forum of Kyrgyzstan's Manas scholars and visited mostly by students from the International University of Kyrgyzstan. The first speaker was the Minister of Culture, who held a 45 minute speech on the word '*tuu*', explaining that it is now incorrectly used as the word for flag, although it originally meant flag pole. The audience was very interested, partly out of respect for the Minister and partly because these details are genuinely interesting to students of Kyrgyz culture. After another number of speeches by members of the forum, the Manaschī of the *Philharmonia*, Urkash Mambetaliev, gave a Manas performance. Urkash, who also sat at the forum desk, had visibly spent considerable time and effort to concentrate and get focussed for his recital. His performance was expressive and passionate, Urkash started to sweat and his hands were shaking. The audience, however, lost interest quickly and both the students and members of the forum began to mumble. It was not long before everyone openly talked amongst themselves, leaving Urkash and his performance without attention. The very same Manaschī that was disregarded so blatantly, received much attention and praise during another performance for a very similar audience. In October 1996, a celebration for the Great Manaschī Mambet Chokmorov was held at his birth place on the south side of Lake İssıkköl. I had been invited for this celebration when I coincidentally called in at the Manas Propaganda Agency in Bishkek on the day that a mini-van filled with Manas scholars departed to attend the festival. After a six-hour drive we came to the

---

<sup>66</sup> *Eje* means aunt or elder sister, and is used to address women older than ones' self. It also means teacher.

house of Mambet's son, where we were treated to a Kyrgyz-style feast (*toi*) with lots of tea and an abundance of food. The women were seated on the floor of one room, the men in another. After a while the women told me to go to the other room to see the Manaschī who had started to perform. The women, most of them Manas scholars themselves, did not seem particularly eager to join me as they had probably heard it all many times before. The men, however, were immersed in the recital. Manaschī Urkash Mambetaliev was seated at the head of the large table cloth (*dastargon*) and recited in such an intense manner that everyone fell quiet, and I felt goose bumps on my arms. When the audience seemed to get a little restless, Urkash began to address his audience and improvised songs about the dignitaries that were present. This was welcomed with laughter and applause.

In February 2000, I saw Urkash at another university-based Manas event. This time it was the American University in Kyrgyzstan that had organised 'The Week of the Manas Epic' for its students. This 'Week' entailed three days of presentations on the Manas epic, of which the first day was the most important. A classroom full of students and Kyrgyz language teachers waited for the American sociology teacher M. Merrill to arrive for her presentation. When it became clear that she would not show up, the dean (*provost*) of the university, Kamilla Sharshekeeva, spoke her opening words<sup>67</sup>, sat down for a while looking extremely bored, and then left. The second speaker, head of the Manas Propaganda Agency Beksultan Jakiev, held a superficial speech about the Manas epic, mentioning once again that it was a very long poem, sixty times longer than the Odyssey. After his talk he left straight away, which coaxed chuckling from the students. A much more interesting presentation was held by Manas scholar Raisa Kidirbaeva, but the students were tired or just not impressed by this woman, for they hardly paid attention. When Urkash started his recital, however, the audience appeared deeply impressed. Contrary to his recital three years ago, Urkash was now listened to with interest and politeness, and a burst of applause followed his performance.

In most situations where I saw Manaschīs and Manas scholars together, the Manas scholars were treated with more respect than the Manaschīs. At the Young Manaschīs Republican Competition (*Jash Manaschilardın Respublikalik Meldeshi*) on March 31,

---

<sup>67</sup> All speeches at this opening were in Russian. Urkash' introduction, performance and the questions and answers afterwards were all in Kyrgyz. Questions answered by Kidirbaeva and Kyrgyz language teachers were in Russian.



1999 in Bishkek<sup>68</sup> for instance, the 39 children who recited *Manas* were blessed by Great *Manaschī*s Shaabai and Kaba, but the jury consisted of *Manas* scholars alone. As we shall see in following chapters, it was the Soviet appreciation for science and literacy that brought *Manas* scholars to the scene and gave rise to their status as part of the Union's elite. In comparison, *Manaschī*s appeared as mere representatives of the folkloric tradition of a backward culture.

If the *Manaschī* was the only *Manas* expert in the company, however, he did receive respect for his profession. On one occasion, I travelled with Talantaalī from Bishkek to Karakol. We bought seats in the car of a businessman from Karakol who went back as a taxi. We all introduced ourselves and talked about our jobs. When we entered the mountains, one of the men asked Talantaalī to give a *Manas* recital. Talantaalī took off his glasses and watch and gave a long and beautiful recital. We all listened quietly, and Talantaalī was thanked heartily afterwards.

Kyrgyzstan's famous writer Chīngīz Aitmatov has also described a situation when a *Manaschī* was highly respected and his recital thoroughly enjoyed. In a book based on his conversations with the Japanese journalist Daisaku Ikeda, he writes:

I once had the privilege to go to one of the kolchozes in Chuya-Tals together with [Sayakbai] Karalaev. The news of Karalaev's arrival spread immediately over the entire village and the neighbouring *aiīls* [villages]. From everywhere the people streamed near – from the fields and the cattle farms, in cars and on tractors. So many people wanted to hear Karalaev, that they obviously could not fit into the Kolchoz clubhouse. So Karalaev performed out on the street. They placed his chair on a hill, the audience gathered around him, as well as they could – on the ground, the floor of a truck, on horseback. Suddenly a thunder cloud appeared and a horrible cloudburst poured out over the crowd. But Karalaev did not interrupt his performance, and no-one left. The people listened to the *Manas* in the pouring rain. They were totally immersed in the singer's song. I have never forgotten this (Aitmatow and Ikeda, 1992:44, my translation).

An important measure of the social status of *Manaschī*s is the financial reward they receive. Of course, the material expression of a skill's value is just one of various forms to express appreciation. As such, a rich artist may be a clever businessman rather than a

---

<sup>68</sup> This competition was organised by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, the UNDP, *Manas* Propaganda Directorate and the Association of *Manaschī*s and *Akins*. It lasted for two days. On April 1, another 11 children took part in the competition.

skilled artist. Still, the amount of resources spent on story telling and the ideas of who is responsible for providing those resources give important insight into the place of a story teller in society. Furthermore, finances influence social status in their turn, as the poor are regarded differently from the rich.

Talantaali told me how in the ideal situation a Manaschi ought to receive gifts for his recitals. People are willing to do this because they feel that ‘through the Manaschi, we give to the Spirit of Manas’. ‘The cheapest gift is a robe or a hat’, he said, ‘but in the old days Manaschi’s received bigger gifts such as a sheep, a horse, a camel or sometimes even a yurt (*boz-üy*).’ The robe (*chapan*) was and still is a typical ceremonial gift. These robes are not for daily use, but have the specific purpose of ceremonial wear, and more specifically of gifts. In Kazakhstan we find the same tradition, internationally known through space travel: cosmonauts who return to the space station in Baikonur traditionally receive a robe and a Kazakh hat. The Afghan ethnographer Nazif Mohib Shahrani reports ceremonial offering of robes among the Pamir Kyrgyz in Afghanistan<sup>69</sup>. He describes a funeral where the relatives of the deceased handed out her possessions to the guests. Shahrani received a sum in cash and a ceremonial robe (*chapan*) (Shahrani, 1979:157). In a footnote he explains:

There are a large number of these *chapan* made out of colourful and sometimes expensive fabrics, but they are not filled with any kind of padding. They are never worn as garments except ceremonially, but are circulated among people on different occasions as a sign of friendship and appreciation or gratitude, and must be returned in the same way at another time (ibid.).

During my fieldwork, I often saw reports in the media about visits of foreign dignitaries who were given a robe with Kyrgyz design and a Kyrgyz felt hat (*kalpak*). At the concert in honour of the twenty-fifth anniversary of a *Philharmonia* composer in March 1997, the celebrated composer received a robe and a felt hat, and there was no surprise or astonishment when he was given yet another felt hat from the hands of president Akayev’s wife. Although I never witnessed an occasion where Manaschi’s were awarded robes for their recitals, Talantaali told me that he had received them, as well as money, hats (*kalpak*) and decorated whips (*kamchi*). Great Manaschi Kaba never mentioned having received a robe, but he always wore a special robe when he recited in public or for a camera. This

---

<sup>69</sup> The Pamir Kyrgyz are descendents of a group of Kyrgyz that settled in the Pamirs when they fled communism in the Soviet Union and China

robe was black and padded, and decorated with Kyrgyz design in gold and green (see the picture of Kaba Atabekov on the book cover).

Of the pre-Soviet period, Radloff has given us a few clues on financial rewards for Manaschiis. In his travel journal *Aus Siberien* he describes how a Kyrgyz narrator received the robe from the shoulders of a sultan in the audience (Radloff, 1893:488). In the preface to the *Proben*, he speaks of:

an entire caste of singers, who have made singing into a, one might say, craft, who go from feast to feast and make a living from their singing (Radloff, 1885:IV) [my translation from German].

Radloff only reveals in passing how he rewarded the narrators who recited for him:

I made sure there was no lack of praise and presents, to somehow incite the singer, but these could not replace the natural impulse (ibid.:XIX-XX).

Sagimbai Orozbekov's career had passed largely under the patronage of Kyrgyz chieftains and wealthy men, according to Daniel Prior (Prior, 2000:13). However, Prior also states that Sagimbai's family continued to live in poverty when the collectors of his famous version, Miftakov and Abdırakhmanov, were 'not able to make adequate compensation to their bard' (ibid.). The use of the word 'continued' suggests that even when Sagimbai was supported by wealthy men for his oral performances, he did not obtain substantial wealth himself.

Prior also provides some insight into the possible financial rewards for Manaschiis in the first years of the Soviet period. He argues that the situation began to change during Tsarist rule that favoured sedentary or at least semi-sedentary existence. The chief of the Sarı Bağış tribe received a yearly pension from the government, moved into a built house and practised agriculture (ibid.:11). Unfortunately, he provides no information on the ways in which narrators gained an income with their skill, and whether this was influenced by what he calls patronage from the chiefs. In the 1920s, a new kind of folklore-collector entered the scene. Kayum Miftakov and his assistant İbrayım Abdırakhmanov had a Jadid background that propagated Turkic and Islamic unity, and as 'New Turks' they had a specific interest in recording the Manas (see chapter three). They tried to obtain material support for the recording of Sagimbai's version from the new Soviet government. In 1924, Adırakhmanov and Sagimbai travelled to Tashkent together after they were summoned to report on their work, but the government never offered any help. However, the *manap* Abdılde Jeenbayev did provide financial support (ibid.:13).

In 1935, the Frunze *Philharmonia* began to employ a permanent Manaschī. Sayakbai Karalaev was the first official Manaschī of the *Philharmonia*, followed by Moldobasan Musulmankulov, Shaabai Azizov and Urkash Mambetaliev. Talantaalī Bakchiev told me that the *Philharmonia* Manaschīs received a monthly salary. Perhaps they were provided with housing and health care as well, as was the common Soviet way of maintaining artists. After their retirement, they received a pension. If they were invited to perform on personal title, they were given a fee (*gonorar*).

During my fieldwork, Urkash Mambetaliev was still employed by the *Philharmonia*. The salary he received had very likely become insufficient, like most state salaries since independence. For other Manaschīs, there is no such thing as a monthly salary (*ailik*). At the ‘Manas 1,000’ festival in 1995, Kaba Atabekov was given the status of Kyrgyz People’s Artist (*Kyrgyz Elinin Artisti*). Kaba showed me the document he received, a little card that was glued into a red leather booklet. It was given to him by president Akayev himself, together with a watch that had the emblem of the festival, a red silhouette of mounted Manas, on the cipher unit. The watch broke when I was there in 1997. His new status also gave Kaba 260 som extra on his monthly pension, a 50% discount on his electricity bill and free tap water, short-distance public transport and medical aid. Kaba was happy with the official recognition of his art, but others around him found this gesture from the government far too meagre. Talantaalī once burst out to me saying:

The government does not show any respect for Manaschīs. They use the Manas for their own purposes. In 1995 a lot of money came in for the Manas festival, but where is that now? One of the goals was to write down the versions of Kaba and Shaabai, but nothing ever came of that. Kaba and Shaabai have been used, they were propaganda during the celebrations but now they are left to their own devices. There is just no respect for national artists, couldn’t they at least have given them a good house<sup>70</sup>, or a monthly food allowance? They receive 200 [sic] som extra now, but what is that?

Kaba-ata’s wife Söken-apa<sup>71</sup> was not satisfied with government support for the Manaschī either. When I arrived in Törtkül for the first time, Söken-apa started her negotiations with regard to my financial contribution with a tirade on how difficult life was for them and how Kaba was visited by scholars from Bishkek and all over the world, but no-one ever helped him financially. Although Söken-apa’s remark had tactical purposes, she still

---

<sup>70</sup> During Soviet times, a house was a common government contribution to an artist’s development.

<sup>71</sup> *Apa* means mother and is added as a sign of respect.

tapped into a generally validated argument. The social status of a Manaschī nowadays often does not yield him much in financial terms.

Talantaalī Bakchiev has long struggled financially. When he lived in Karakol, his income was made up entirely of his salary of that which he received in his position as a Kyrgyz language and literature teacher at the university. This income was very low, and at times there was not enough food in the house to feed the children. In those days, Talantaalī did not earn anything by being a Manaschī. Rather, it cost him money, because he paid for the publication of his written version of the Story of Almambet himself. Whenever he was invited to perform, he was given something, because this is customary (*salt*), but that was never enough to live on. Talantaalī decided to move to Bishkek when the supervisor of his dissertation told him she would hire him as a teacher at the American University in Kyrgyzstan, where wages were considerably better. Furthermore, being in Bishkek offered Talantaalī the chance to teach at the Manaschī School of the Meerim Fund, although pay was very low there. Talantaalī went on a number of trips abroad, to Uzbekistan, the Caucasus and Mongolia, where his expenses were covered by organisations such as the Soros foundation and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, in addition to a received fee (*gonorar*). Although he also occasionally performs for Kyrgyz radio and TV, he does not receive payment in return for his appearance. This was different during Soviet times, Talantaalī told me, but he did not know why payment of fees ceased.

The position of Manaschīs in society is of course not absolute. There are differences between Manaschīs which influence their personal reputation. Many factors contribute to these differences, ranging from individual features such as a Manaschī's personality and talent to social factors such as a Manaschī's age, gender or region of origin. These differences are diffuse, and there is no system of standardised levels of proficiency. The state has a set of titles that are awarded to artists of all disciplines, among whom are Manaschīs. Urkash Mambetaliev, for instance, was awarded the title of Honoured Artist of the Kyrgyz Republic (*Kyrgyz Respublikasınin Emgek Singirgen Artist*) in 1991 (ME II:313). Kaba Atabekov, Shaabai Azizov and Seidene Moldova became People's Artists of the Kyrgyz Republic (*Kyrgyz Respublikasınin El Artisti*) in 1995. In Soviet times, Manaschīs received even more general decorations. Sayakbai Karalaev, for instance, received the decoration 'Workers' Red Flag' (*Emgek Kızıl Tuu*) three times, as well as the Honorary Token (*Ardak Belgisi*) and many deeds (*gramotalar*) (ibid.:190). However, in those days, it was mostly the artists working with Manas in opera, theatre and film, as well as Manas scholars, who received medals for their Manas work.

Next to these general cultural titles, Manaschīs can obtain diplomas and certificates for their participation in Manaschī competitions. These too are organised by state organs such as the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Education or the Manas Propaganda Agency. The competition certificates are specifically for Manaschīs and do enhance a Manaschī's status and recognition, but they do not raise a Manaschī to a permanent stage. Permanent titles are awarded through a more complex system of social recognition. The only title that a Manaschī can obtain is that of Great Manaschī (*Chong Manaschī*). When I asked Talantaalī how a Manaschī qualified for this title, he replied:

Before, it was the people (*el*) who gave this title. Now that is the same, but it can be made official by scholars (*ilimpozdor*). Manaschīs are called Great Manaschī (*Chong Manaschī*) when they tell all the parts of the epic. That is, Manas, Semetei and Seitek, and maybe also Er Sarīk, Kenenim, Alīmsarīk, Kunansarīk, Akaiar and Akjol.

Manaschīs are also typified as real (*chīnigī*) versus imprint (*jattama*) Manaschī. These qualifications were often mentioned by my informants, whether they were Manaschī, Manas scholar or laymen. They based their judgement on the actual performance of the Manaschī, or on hear-say. Manas scholars have also introduced terms such as pupil (*ürönchük*) and quasi or rhapsode (*chala*) Manaschī, but I never encountered these terms out of a written, scholarly context.

The informal circuit played a crucial part in ranking the Manaschīs. During Manas conferences or Manas competitions, the corridors were filled with gossip in the form of accusations and insinuations on the one hand and expressions of admiration on the other. A certain Manaschī was accused of using black magic, another of corruption. A third Manaschī confessed to me that he had been forced to bribe the jury of the Young Manaschī Competition. His pupil, a young relative, had not performed well, but in order to safeguard his own reputation, the Manaschī was obliged to make his pupil a winner. Other Manaschīs were pointed out to me to be future Great Manaschīs. The status of the incumbent Great Manaschīs was challenged as well. Dutch documentary makers who were looking for a narrator who could personify 'the last Manaschī' were told not to work with Shaabai, because he mumbles. Kaba was also gossiped about and said to be too soft (*joosh*) to be a strong Manaschī.

## 2.6 Audiences

The social and political contexts of various periods provided different forms of access to and interest in the *Manas* epic for its audiences. For Radloff, the audience is highly important in the creation of epic poems. He gives a vivid, but general, description of the behaviour of the audience in the period before the Soviet Union:

A deep silence surrounds the narrator when he manages to capture his audience; these sit and listen to the words of the narrator with the upper part of their body bent forward and with radiant eyes, and every well-chosen word, every sparkling play of words evokes expressions of approval (Radloff, 1885:III) [my translation from German].

Belek Soltonoyev, described by Daniel Prior to be ‘one of the first Kyrgyz intellectuals to aspire to Western scholarly practice in historiography’ (Prior, 2002:188), wrote that he heard Tinibek recite *Manas* and *Semetei* for about three days, and ‘when the people asked him to go on to the end, he said it might take two months’ (ibid.:191). The audience expressed their appreciation of Tinibek as follows:

I saw how, when he sang from sunset to dawn, 200-300 people sat watching inside and outside encircling the yurt, not sleeping and not making a sound (ibid.).

But Radloff explains that the audience has a role that goes beyond mere listening and giving praise:

The strongest incitement comes of course from the audience that surrounds the singer. Because the singer longs for approval from the crowd, although this is not only for the fame but also for other advantages, he always tries to aim his singing to the surrounding listeners. If he is not directly requested to sing a certain episode, he will start his singing with a prelude to lead the audience into the tenor of his song. By skilfully weaving verse with addresses to prestigious persons in the audience he knows to bring his listeners in the mood before he moves on to the actual song. When he notices from the cheers of the audience that he has full attention, he directly gets into action, or he creates a summary of the previous episode and then commences the plot. The song is not sung in an even pace. Each expression of praise from the audience incites the singer to new efforts, and he knows how to adjust the song entirely to the composition of the audience. If rich and prominent Kyrgyz are present, he skillfully interweaves praises of their lineages and sings those episodes of which he expects particular approval of the prominent. If only the poor are present, he will not hesitate to inject venomous remarks about the

arrogance of the prominent and rich, more elaborately as he finds more approval of the audience (Radloff, 1885:XVIII-XIX)

Daniel Prior has elaborated on this idea in his study on the role of patrons in Manas performance. He points out that patrons, a particular section of the audience formed by chiefs, folktale collectors or the Soviet government, have influenced the topics of the tale. Speaking of the time before the Soviet Union, he explains that by the end of the nineteenth century, the story of Manas' son Semetei was much more popular among the chiefs than the story of Manas itself (Prior, 2000:11). Prior seems to assume that the shift in preference by the chiefs led to an increase in Semetei telling by the bards. He does not offer a conclusive explanation of the change in appreciation among the chiefs, although a connection to the changes in society at large seems obvious to him:

One can see that the imposition of Czarist rule in Kirghizia would have a profound effect on the relations between epic bards and their patrons. The relative calm under Russia put an end to the existential worries that had been a fact of life for the previous generation. The Kirghiz chiefs were forbidden from engaging in the mutual cattle-raiding (*barimta*) which had given them an arena for heroism. (...) The new order favoured sedentary or at least semi-sedentary existence. (...) V.M. Zhirmunskii characterized the situation in the following manner: "The monumental, archaic heroics of *Manas* and the grandiose, superhuman scales of the events described in the distant, legendary past were brought down [in *Semetey*] to more human dimensions, closer to real life and to representation of modern times." It cannot be denied that in Semetei the scale of the epic was pared down, but a concern with "modern times" is open to interpretation. It is telling that the expanded Russian presence in Kirghizia did not lead to more mention of things Russian in the epics. The point that should be recognized is that this is natural. The political-existential underpinnings of the epic genre experienced significant erosion in the latter half of the nineteenth century. At the same time, submission to Russia had been changed from a pressing subject of concern and even conflict into a fact of life (ibid.:10-11).

The importance of patronage is not always openly acknowledged by Manaschīs, however. In paragraph 2.2.4, I have quoted from the Manas Encyclopaedia the memories of Manaschī and Manas collector Abdīrakhmanov on the Manas evenings in the winter camp (*kıştoo*) of his village. Here, Manas telling was an interactive event, where everyone who wished to recite took the opportunity to do so. Kaba Atabekov gives a slightly different



picture when he speaks about his trips to the summer pastures (*jailoo*) with his mentor Mambet Chokmorov. Here, the two Manaschīs were the only ones to recite, while the audience sat and listened, or prepared meat<sup>72</sup>. Both Kaba and Abdīrakhmanov speak of their audiences as large groups of villagers. Neither mention the importance of *beys* or *manaps* in the facilitation of Manas performances, as we find in Radloff and Daniel Prior's studies. This could mean at least three things: either Kaba and Abdīrakhmanov did not find it important or wise to mention the patronage of chiefs, or there were several settings for Manas performance, those staged by leaders and those at other occasions. Thirdly, patronage of local leaders may no longer have played a role in the early twentieth-century setting of Manas performance. Prior has pointed out that the *manap* Abdilde Jeenbayev of the Cherik tribe was connected to the recording of Sagımbai's version in the 1920s, but of course, this says nothing about the involvement of *manaps* in oral performance.

The Soviet Union slowly changed the access and interest of audiences in Manas performance. The introduction of a school system available to and eventually compulsory for everyone influenced this in a number of ways. Wide-spread literacy arose in concurrence with the availability of written texts of the Manas epic (see chapter 3). The Union-wide school system also gave children such as Kaba Atabekov the chance to recite the Manas at Olympiads in Kyrgyzstan and other parts of the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union organised Manas competitions, where many Manaschīs were brought together to recite and be judged by a jury. Before the Soviet Union, the concept of competition was not unknown to poets and improvisers. In a so-called *aitish*, poets challenged each other to outwit one another in sharp and smart improvisations. In a Manas *aitish*, one Manaschī started a recital, that was followed up by another and if present, yet another. A well-known *aitish* was held in 1917 in what is now China, the town Kakshaal (ME I:48)<sup>73</sup>. Sagımbai Orozbekov and the local Manaschī Jusupbakun<sup>74</sup> recited about the campaign to Bei-jin. Sagımbai is said to have recited for a whole day and a whole night. When Jusupbakun took over, he too went on for a day and a night. Then, after comparing their tales, they continued on for another two days and nights. The judgement of the jury is described by Soltonoyev as follows:

---

<sup>72</sup> From these two accounts, it seems that Manas performance occurred both in summer and in winter. This is in contrast with the Khakas epic tradition, where epics could only be told in the cold season (Nyssen, 2005, <http://www.iias.nl/oideion/journal/issue04/nyssen/front-a.html>. Last visited March 15, 2008).

<sup>73</sup> Belek Soltonoyev situates the *aitish* in Kara-chiy (Prior, 2002:192).

<sup>74</sup> Soltonoyev calls him Jūsūbakun.

Then Sagalı [a jury member] said thus: “One of the epic bards is a Sarıbağış, one is a Čerik, and I am a Kıldık, and if I say so, the evaluations you have just given are correct. But Sagımbay changed the place where the seven khans were summoned, from Talas to the Ala-too, and he had them round Issyk Kul and come to Talas via Alamaty. It seems that Sagımbay himself and his crowd had drunk a bit of kumiss and eaten a bit of fatted foal and made the rounds a bit during the day, and so he just barely brought the army to Burana. He did get them into Beijin on the campaign, thank you.

“Jüsübakun recited the route to Beijin well. There are people who have heard the name Beijin, but no one in this group has ever seen it. And Jüsübakun laid it on when he recited. He was stopped before the seven khans had made it completely out of their encampment. He got to the point where Almambet and Sırgak meet Karagul, when Manas hasn’t caught up to the campaign. In my opinion, Jüsübakun is the winner.” Everyone went with Sagalı’s opinion (Soltonoyev in Prior, 2002:192-193).

The Manas Encyclopaedia provides a different solution to the contest, and claims that both Manaschīs obtained equal prizes: a horse and a sheepskin coat (ME I:48).

The Manaschī competitions of the Soviet era were quite different from the old *aitīsh*, however. When I asked Talantaalī Bakchiev if this kind of competitions actually fitted the Manas, he said that the modern version was not right (*tuura emes*). In the new form, every narrator prepares their own piece beforehand, unlike at the old *aitīsh*, when recitals arose from interaction between participating Manaschīs. Another change was that this new form of Manas competition brought the Manas to a stage, a setting in which the performers sat on a platform in front of the audience. All evidence of Manas performances before the Soviet times indicate that Manaschīs sat on the floor, forming a circle together with their audience. The Manaschī would sit at the *tör* (the place for the most respected guest, opposite the door). The stage setting put the audience further away from and opposite to the Manaschī. When the Frunze *Philharmonia* began to programme Manaschīs, they performed within this stage setting as well. The audience was thus transferred to a setting that originated in European-style concert music. Access to a performance no longer depended on social relations with the host of a Manas recital, as they could buy a ticket and attend. The availability of cash now determined access – although it is not unthinkable that social relations may have played a role in case concert tickets were scarce.

While the influence of the Soviet period brought many new contexts for Manas performance, the idea of ‘in context performance’ in which the traditional setting is seen as the norm, was upheld. A number of films were made about the Manas, the most famous of which is *Manaschi*, a 1965 film about Sayakbai Karalaev by director B.T. Shamshiev. In this film, Sayakbai passionately performs the Manas in front of a yurt set up in the mountains, surrounded by an audience of Kyrgyz shepherd families. This was considered the authentic context for a Manas performance.

Manas performance received an impetus in 1995, the year of the ‘Manas 1,000’ festival. The whole country was mobilised to provide good Manaschis for the main celebrations in Manas. Manas competitions on local and national levels were held to find Manaschis for the main celebration in Talas. Competitions to find the best yurts (*boz-üylör*) and felt carpets (*shirdaktar*) were set up in a similar way. During my fieldwork I met many people who had engaged into one of these competitions, and they were very proud when their yurt or carpet had won and was sent to Talas. I also heard complaints about the accessibility of the festival: only high officials and foreign guests were given the chance to go, enjoy the spectacle and eat the food. The common man was left to watch the festivities on TV.

During my fieldwork, I witnessed several forms of access to Manas performances in different contexts. In the village Kazıbek, Manas recitals were to be found at concerts in the village club or at the school. These recitals were usually given by schoolchildren who had learnt parts by heart. I never saw the local Manaschi Kanımbübü there, and she told me she rarely performed in public. The Manas epic was part of the school curriculum in the days of my fieldwork. I attended two classes in which the Manas was taught. One was taught by the son of my host family, the other by a female Kyrgyz teacher. The son seemed to understand that I wanted to witness a class as close to the real situation as possible and let me sit in the back of the class. The female teacher, however, was intent on presenting me as an authority rather than a fly on the wall. Both teachers were aware of my presence and weaved as much Manas as possible into their class. Still, the classes did give me an impression of what the children know and how they are taught about the Manas.

The class taught by the son of my host family was a seventh grade group, and the children were 12 or 13 years old. The class began with a girl who gave a recital from Semetei. She was very good, and I was told that she was the daughter of Kanımbübü. After that, the teacher asked the children what they knew of the Manas. A girl stood up

and began a long, monotonously spoken monologue about Manas' birth. After a while she ran out of things to say and sat down. The rest of the class whispered and giggled until a boy got up. He too told everything he knew about an episode of the Manas. Meanwhile, the son-in-law of the family, who taught German at the same school, came in and sat next to me. He showed me drawings that the children had made of Manas. The quality of the drawings impressed me. When the teacher told some more stories, the other children lost their shyness and from their reactions it was clear they also knew a lot about the contents of the epic tale. At that point, the teacher brought out a booklet of a speech held by president Akayev at the Manas 1,000 festival about the Seven Principles of the Manas. The children knew these principles very well too. After an hour of Kyrgyz literature, it was time for Kyrgyz grammar. In honour of my presence, the teacher told the children to write sentences about Manas, Semetei or Seitek and analyse them grammatically. The children put sentences on the board like: 'We are proud of the Manas epic', and 'Manas is the history and heritage of the Kyrgyz people'. These sentences occur often in propagandistic, journalist and textbook publications on the Manas and were easily picked up by the children.

The second class I visited was a combined class of eighth and ninth form pupils. The teacher addressed me rather than the class when she said that during Soviet times, the epic received less attention than it does now. She said that the Manas was an Encyclopaedia of the old Kyrgyz way of living. She gave an example: Manas once dreamt the moon came to his armpit, and he went to his uncle Bakai to ask what this meant. This shows that the Kyrgyz had high respect for their elders. The teacher explained that the main theme of the Manas was bringing the people together and taking them back to their homeland. The theme of Semetei is fighting the foreign enemies that still lived in their home country, and Seitek's theme is the internal struggle within the Kyrgyz. The children said they prefer the story of Manas, because it contains the most traditions and customs. The teacher then asked me to ask the children questions. I made clear that I did not want to participate but rather was there to observe, which clearly annoyed the teacher. My translator then suggested that the children could ask each other questions, and when they did not, she asked some questions herself. She asked what character traits they knew of Manas and which ones they would want to have themselves. A girl stood up and said that Manas was a hero (*baatir*), that he was strong, kind, honest and truthful. When the teacher asked if she knew any bad qualities, the girl replied: 'Yes, he was a little too sure of his strength and didn't always think about what he did. He also was not very democratic'. The teacher then told the children that last summer, she saw the footprint of Manas' wife Khanikey in a rock in Talas, and she was surprised by how big it was. 'This tells us that our ancestors were very big and strong.

Men and women were both giants', she said. Now, the children began to ask questions, such as: 'How come Manas was so strong?', and 'Why did Manas marry three wives?' The teacher enthusiastically replied to their questions and long after the bell had rung the children stayed and listened intently. Afterwards the teacher apologised to me, saying that the stories she told today were not in the official curriculum, but she just knew them very well and the children enjoyed them.

People in Kazıbek also heard about the Manas through mass media. Newspapers were not as commonly read (or available) as in towns and cities, but radio and TV were suppliers of local and national news. One informant told me that she had once seen a clairvoyant woman on TV who told that she had dreamt that she was up to her waist in water. Suddenly she heard a voice that said: 'Take the tree-stump out of the water!' The tree turned out to be Jaisang, one of Manas' poets, and from that moment on she started to write about the Manas – in handwriting very different from her own. One evening in November a TV show of Kyrgyz music and dance was watched and thoroughly enjoyed by everyone in my host family. A Manaschi gave a performance in a studio, in a scenery of a yurt with a woman and little boy dressed in traditional clothing staged as the audience. The Manaschi was accompanied by a drum, which added dramatic effect. His performance was followed by a modern-style dance that portrayed the fight of the forty knights (*choro*) with demons from China. The show ended with a play about Khanikey and Semetei.

In Bishkek, access of audiences to the Manas did not differ all that much from the village. There were the Manas books, recitals on radio and TV, and Manas lessons in schools that also circulated in the village, and the occasional Manaschi recital in private homes. Some forms were specific for the capital, such as the academic conferences which I described above. Furthermore, there were a variety of drama productions and operas based on the Manas during my time in Bishkek. For instance, the Kyrgyz Drama Theatre gave a performance that no-one in the audience seemed to understand, because when there was a pause after an hour, people were wondering if this was the end or just a break. The performance consisted of recitals in a Manas style and was called *Kagılaiın Manasım*, 'I will sacrifice myself for Manas'. Talantaalı later told me it was based on the Manas as told by Tinıbek. Songs were sung beautifully, but the story line had become so modern that it was hard to follow.

## 2.7 Is the oral performance of the Manas epic dying out?

An often-heard opinion is that the oral performance of the Manas is dying out. ‘The Last Manaschi’ seems to be the favourite title for documentaries about the Manas epic. Not only the previously-mentioned Dutch documentary of 1998 was called *The Last Manaschi*, a Kyrgyz film by Melis Ubukeev made in 1994 also carried this title (*Akırkı Manaschi*). Already in the 1960s, the Kazakh writer Mukhtar Auezov referred to the Great Manaschi Sayakbai Karalaev as ‘the last of the Mohicans’. The idea that the Manas is dying out and that we now behold the very last specimen of Manaschi is catchy and makes a movie more attractive, but it is obviously incorrect. First of all, the Dutch film portrays Kaba Atabekov as the last Manaschi, but in Ubukeev’s film, Shaabai Azizov takes up this role. But this twist of reality is not all. In this chapter I have shown that there are many Manaschis in Kyrgyzstan today, young and old, male and female, villagers and city-folk. All these people may not be Great Manaschis like Shaabai and Kaba, and a number of them learn their recitals by heart from the books, but they do assure that the tradition is passed on. If it is so obvious that there is no such thing as a last Manaschi as yet, then how come this idea became so widely accepted?

An important aspect is that Manas recital has become categorised as folklore in Soviet times. Folklore is often regarded as on the verge of extinction. For example, speaking about the Outer Hebrides in Scotland, J.F. Campbell writes in 1860 that his collection of tales is ‘a museum of curious rubbish about to perish’ (Campbell in Chapman, 1978:117). He quotes a member of his collecting team, who attributed the disappearance of folk tales ‘partly to reading, which in a manner supplies a substitute for them, partly to bigoted religious ideas, and partly to narrow utilitarian views’ (ibid.). Forty years later, however, another folklore collector displays the same idea. Alexander Carmichael writes that:

Gaelic oral literature has been disappearing during the last three centuries. It is now becoming meagre in quantity, inferior in quality and greatly isolated. (...) Several causes have contributed towards this decadence – principally the Reformation, the Risings, the evictions, the Disruption, the schools, and the spirit of the age. (...) an attempt be made even yet to preserve these memories ere they disappear forever. (...) They [the people he gathered his material from] are almost all dead now, leaving no successors (Carmichael in Chapman, 1978:117-118).

Up until today, people go out into small villages and islands to look for the last old people to collect their lore before it will be lost forever. Folklore thus seems to be regarded as

authentic only when it is done by old people. But one should not forget that the younger generation will grow old, and they will eventually achieve the status that comes with old age. Furthermore, by the time they are old, their versions of folklore will be regarded as authentic, and new elements that have been incorporated may have acquired the status of archaisms.

Nevertheless, the oral performance of the *Manas* epic too is characterised as a fading tradition. Despite clear evidence that the practice of oral recital is very much alive, observers do not tire to emphasize that the tradition is moribund. In the Dutch documentary, we see a discussion between a *Manas* scholar and Manaschi Kaba Atabekov about whether the *Manas* will die out or not. At a meal with a large group of people, the *Manas* scholar asks Kaba if any of his children or grandchildren tell the *Manas*. Kaba answers: 'Not at the moment. I think that's on purpose!'. The people in the room giggle. Later on, the scholar argues for the camera that *Manas* performance is dying out, although he cannot exclude the possibility that the Spirit of *Manas* will call new Manaschis. This discussion was not merely imposed by the filmmakers. During my fieldwork, I also regularly met people who wondered about the future of the *Manas*. One day, at a drinking session with Kaba and his neighbours, someone asked Kaba if there was any young Manaschi talent. Kaba replied that there was not, and the neighbour concluded that this meant the *Manas* was doomed to disappear.

The idea that the introduction of modernity inevitably leads to the demise of oral tradition was implicit in the world view of many of my informants. Reciting the *Manas* was presented as the art of the pre-modern Kyrgyz who lacked script and modern media such as radio, television and cinema. With the new way of life, oral tradition was rendered redundant – the remaining Manaschis were mere survivals of an older age. Interestingly, Kyrgyz students commonly use the past tense when they describe the art of *Manas* narration – even if they also claim that the *Manas* epic is still recited today.

For a long time, the idea that globalisation would lead to the merging of cultures and the creation of one Coca-Cola-and-pop-music culture was generally accepted in- and outside of the social sciences. And indeed, in Kyrgyzstan too, global culture has gained foothold, of which the *Manas*-Coca-Cola billboard attests (see figure 1.1). However, social scientists have long since discerned a counter reaction to the advance of global culture. A number of cultural elements have not only escaped oblivion, they have actually gained importance as part of a 'cultural revival' (de Ruijter, 2000:13). This process of 'glocalisation', the rise of localisation in response to globalisation (Robertson, 1995:25'44),

can be witnessed all over the world. Social scientists have offered explanations for this from essentialist and instrumentalist points of view. First of all, the attachment to local cultural expressions has been attributed to the basic human need to 'belong'. The anonymity of global culture overwhelms and evokes the wish of individuals to identify with smaller, local communities. Secondly, the revival and intensification of cultural symbols has been explained from an instrumentalist point of view, as cultural elements such as folklore can be employed as strategic weapons in the global arena (de Ruijter, 2000:13). Local groups can assert their right to exist by displaying a distinct culture, and individual actors can turn these cultural elements into commodities which can be sold or used to attract grants and subsidies. This is done mostly actively by political and intellectual elites. They work within the framework of a 'global hierarchy of value' (Herzfeld, 2003), which frames the nation's ancient monuments as museum pieces, denying them the liberty to change or evolve. Artists and artisans are stuck with an image of their art that becomes a millstone around their necks, and can even work as evidence of their incurable 'backwardness' (ibid.).

If we look at the Manas epic, we see a similar 'cultural revival' and an employment of the Manas as a cultural symbol in a globalising arena. This began when the Kyrgyz were drawn into the vast multi-ethnic entity of the Soviet Union. The Manas epic was a piece of evidence that sustained the Kyrgyz claim to being a nation, worthy of the right for self-determination and a sovereign republic. The impressive work of art was employed to lift the prestige of the Kyrgyz among the other Soviet peoples. When the Soviet Union fell away and Kyrgyzstan came to play a role of its own in the process of globalisation, the Manas epic served well to convince the world that the Kyrgyz were an old and dignified people with a fascinating history and culture, worthy of preservation and protection.

Incidentally, the oral performance of the epic played a minor role in the presentation of the Manas to the outside world. Practices of oral performance were discussed and glorified, but seldom employed to impress. As a result of the Soviet legacy, books of Manas recitals and scholarly conferences had achieved a higher status than recitals. The Programme of the 'Manas 1,000' festival, for instance, featured theatre performances, a film festival, an opera, a flower laying ceremony, openings of several museums and exhibitions, a scholarly conference and horse games and sports. On the evening of Day 4, a 'musical-ethnographic evening' was scheduled at the Manas museum in Talas. It seems likely that Manas performances took place during this night. In a total of five festival days, this is not much.



Eight years after the ‘Manas 1,000’ festival, the Manas epic was drawn into a new UNESCO project. In UNESCO’s ‘quest for the recognition of the function and values of living cultural expressions and practices’, a list of the Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity was drawn up ([www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org))<sup>75</sup>. The aim of creating this list was to raise ‘awareness of the importance of the oral and intangible heritage and the need to safeguard it’, to encourage countries ‘to take legal and administrative measures for the protection of their oral and intangible heritage’ and to promote ‘the participation of traditional artists and local practitioners in identifying and revitalizing their intangible cultural heritage’ (ibid.). In 2003, Kyrgyzstan was added to the list, but interestingly, this was not with the Manas epic. Perhaps as an extension of the Association of *Akins* and *Manaschis* that was active in the late 1990s, the Kyrgyz contribution to the list was broadened to the ‘art of *akins*, Kyrgyz epic tellers’, of which the Manas epic formed a major part. On the website of UNESCO, the intangible heritage of the Kyrgyz is described as follows:

The predominant form of cultural expression among the Kyrgyz nomads is the narration of epics. The art of the *Akyns*, the Kyrgyz epic tellers, combines singing, improvisation and musical composition. The epics are performed at religious and private festivities, seasonal ceremonies and national holidays and have survived over the centuries by oral transmission.

The value of the Kyrgyz epics lies largely in their dramatic plots and philosophical underpinnings. They represent an oral encyclopaedia of Kyrgyz social values, cultural knowledge and history. The pre-eminent Kyrgyz epic is the 1000-year-old Manas trilogy, which is noteworthy not only for its great length (sixteen times longer than Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*), but also for its rich content. Blending fact and legend, the Manas immortalises important events in Kyrgyz’s history since the ninth century. The Kyrgyzs have also preserved over forty “smaller” epics. While the Manas is a solo narration, these shorter works are generally performed to the accompaniment of the *komuz*, the three-stringed Kyrgyz lute. Each epic possesses a distinctive theme, melody and narrative style. *Akyns* were once highly respected figures who toured from region to region and frequently participated in storytelling contests. They were appreciated for their proficiency in narration, expressive

---

<sup>75</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=00104>, last visited 01-02-2008

gestures, intonation and lively mimicry, so well suited to the epics' emotionally charged content.

During the 1920s, the first part of the Manas trilogy was recorded in written form based on the oral interpretation of the great epic singer, Sagynbay. The epics remain an essential component of Kyrgyz identity and continue to inspire contemporary writers, poets, and composers; even today, the traditional performances are still linked to sacred cultural spaces. Although there are fewer practitioners nowadays, master akyns continue to train young apprentices and are helped by recent revitalization initiatives supported by the Kyrgyz government ([www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org))<sup>76</sup>.

UNESCO World Heritage Lists, aiming at preservation of nature and culture, are increasingly subject to criticism. Interest groups oppose plans to submit a specific natural reserve to the list out of fear that the area will come under strict rules that can hamper developments that they regard as positive and valuable. When it comes to oral traditions, one might also wonder if preserving existing oral traditions is a goal that has to be pursued uncritically. At a conference at Leiden University, Mineke Schipper wondered what should be done when cracks and fissures appear in the heritage, because it comes in motion<sup>77</sup>. Attempts to safeguard oral traditions tend to ignore the vital component of fluidity and flexibility and may even freeze a previously dynamic art form. A second point of caution concerns the choice of specific oral traditions. Schipper wonders whether the selected oral traditions represent generally accepted cultural values, or whether specific individuals may have a personal interest in passing on this particular piece of intangible heritage.

Interestingly, though, the oral performance of the Manas epic has not fallen prey to the forceful 'global hierarchy of value' as Herzfeld has described it, nor to the preservation quest of UNESCO. Manaschīs continue to narrate the epic in the way they perceive as genuine. Although some members of their audience have come to see the oral performance as a living museum piece, Manaschīs also find audiences who appreciate the epic for more than its exotic and antique qualities. And although the Manaschīs I met were not successful in appropriating funds provided by UNESCO, they have not ceased to perform.

The Manas epic has a specific feature that could very well be responsible for the continuation of its oral tradition, and that is its spiritual component. The connection of the Manas epic with the spirits of Kyrgyz ancestors deepens the meaning of the tale for the

---

<sup>76</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?topic=mp&cp=KG#TOC1>, last visited 01-02-2008

<sup>77</sup> <http://www.studiumgenerale.leidenuniv.nl/index.php3?c=21>, last visited 01-02-2008

narrators and their audience. Not only are they entertained by the tale, not only do they assert their ethnic identity by means of the tale, they are also brought into contact with the supernatural world when they recite or listen to the *Manas* epic. A *Manas* performance has the potential to strike a significant chord among those who believe in the existence and importance of ancestral spirits. As this belief is firmly rooted in Kyrgyz cosmology, a *Manas* performance can connect reciters and their audience to the Kyrgyz part of their life world on a profound level. The assumption that the Spirit of *Manas* has the power to influence daily life fuels the survival of the oral tradition. Being called by the Spirit of *Manas* ignites a drive to recite, ignoring the Spirit's demands is perceived to be too dangerous to risk. Contact with the Spirit of *Manas* provides the art of epic recital with a cause greater than mere ambition or enjoyment. This helps individuals to endure or overcome the difficulties of the times.

The case of Talantaali Bakchiev combines the above-mentioned factors of the spiritual element of *Manas* recital and glocalization. Talantaali was raised in a Russified family and attended a Russian school. When he dreamt a vocation dream, his parents were unable to guide him in traditional Kyrgyz fashion. His maternal grandfather understood what was going on and helped him find the way to deal with his vocation properly. Talantaali felt reconnected with his Kyrgyz background through this experience. In Soviet times, Talantaali had been active in the Soviet youth organisation *Komsomol*. When I met him, he had become a fervent Kyrgyz patriot, who spoke Kyrgyz in situations where others spoke Russian and who felt that Kyrgyzstan ought to be built upon traditional Kyrgyz insights.

Being a *Manaschi* gave Talantaali a special quality that affected his relations with other Kyrgyz, with Russians and with the new coming foreigners. His dedication to an ancient Kyrgyz tradition has earned him respect – although it has been difficult for him to turn this quality into sustainable financial rewards so far.

Most importantly, however, Talantaali senses a connection with the Spirit of *Manas* and other epic characters, which forms a leitmotiv in all of his life choices. He has had to make side-steps in his career, such as teaching Kyrgyz language and writing a dissertation on a *Manas*-based novel in stead of the subject of his passion, which is the art of *Manas* recital and the importance of the spiritual connection. But he seizes every opportunity to disseminate his views on the true nature of *Manaschi*hood. His recurring dreams, visions and trances keep him on the path of being an oral performer of the *Manas* epic.

## Chapter Three The Manas Published

Recitals of the Manas epic were first written down in the late nineteenth century. At first, this was done by non-Kyrgyz explorers for a non-Kyrgyz audience. By the 1920s, the first Kyrgyz tale-collectors joined their ranks. The literacy offensive instigated by the Soviet government that followed opened up a whole new context for the Manas epic. In 1897, only 3.1% of the population could read and write, but by 1939, the literacy rate in Kyrgyzstan had risen to 79.8% (Korth, 2005:90). The number of people who could read the recorded poems thus increased significantly. As the advancement of literacy came with a set of ideas on civilisation and backwardness, the idea that written versions were important and necessary also took hold among performers and audiences of the Manas epic. Written versions of the Manas became symbols for the level of Kyrgyz civilisation in a way their oral performance could not. At the same time, the written versions turned the epic into a series of fixed texts, which changed the dynamic of its political employment.

This chapter provides an overview of the efforts in recording and publishing the Manas epic. It focuses on how writing the tale down was shaped by, and shaped in its own turn, the oral performance and the political use of the Manas epic.

### 3.1 Publications of the Manas Epic before the Soviet Union

#### 3.1.1 Majmu-at-Tavarikh

The first known written source that mentions Manas is the Majmu at-Tavarikh. This early sixteenth-century Farsi text is written by Sheif ad-Din Aksikent and his son Nooruz who lived in Ferghana<sup>78</sup>. The Majmu-at-Tavarikh was discovered in the 1960s by the Tatar professor Tagirjanov. The text does not provide a recording of a Manas recital, in fact, it does not even mention the existence of a tale or an epic that is called Manas. Manas is presented as a historic figure within an overview of heroes and events of the ninth - fifteenth centuries.

The Manas Encyclopaedia gives a résumé of the story that features Manas, which goes as follows. Yakub, leader of the Karkiralik (Crane) Kïpchak, has been conquered by

---

<sup>78</sup> Ferghana is the name of a city and of the fertile valley that is now divided over the territories of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan

the Kalmak Chunkcha. With the help of Ong Khan, Yakub's people manage to defeat Chunkcha. Yakub begets a son, Manas, and Chunkcha begets Joloi. When Chunkcha dies, his son Joloi steps in his place. Joloi takes his change for revenge when Ong Khan dies. He destroys the residence of Yakub and takes him captive. Yakub's son Manas, who is twelve years old, brings forty young Crane Kipchak from Talas to rescues his father. When they return to Talas and Chatkal, they are followed by Joloi, who plunders the place. Later on, Manas and the forty young men (*jigit*) receive support from a certain Toktomush, who destroys a city called Manas and comes to a reconciliation with Joloi. When Toktomush is away fighting other people, Joloi uses this advantage and once again plunders Yakub's residence Kara-Kishtak and a city called Manasia. Manas finds new allies and defeats Joloi again. When Joloi strikes again, Toktomush' support of Manas stops. This time, the victor Joloi decides to kill Manas by poisoning him. However, Manas is rescued by an antidote he received from someone called Seif Jalal ad-Din. Two months later, Joloi attacks Kara-Kishtak once again, and a battle follows. Joloi dies in this battle and Manas takes residence in Kara-Kishtak (ME I:387-388).

The status of the *Majmu-at-Tavarikh* remains controversial. British linguistics professor Arthur Hatto doubts its authenticity as a sixteenth century text. He explains that what was discovered in the 1960s was not the original document, but merely the citation of parts of the *Majmu-at-Tavarikh* in two different manuscripts. One manuscript is a nineteenth century document, the other is dated 1792-3 (Hatto, 1977:90). I have not been able to trace the origin of Hatto's assertion that the often-mentioned discovery of the *Majmu* was not the *Majmu* itself, but its citation in other manuscripts. The *Manas Encyclopaedia* and other sources from Kyrgyzstan never speak of citations of the *Majmu*, but appear to refer to the manuscript itself. The *Encyclopaedia* shows the cover page of the manuscript in Arabic letters that was found by professor Tagirjanov (ME I:387). A website of St. Petersburg University on archived Persian texts lists:

**Ms 963** the literary chronicle of Central Asia *Majmu' at-Tawarikh* with fragments from the epic poem *Manas*, compiled by Sayf ad-Din Akhsikandi in the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century with the second part added by the author's son, containing the history of the Shirqand shaykhs. Now the manuscript of the SPb IOS collection seems to be the only one to survive. The manuscript was partly published in facsimile by Prof Tagirdjanov in 1960.<sup>79</sup>

---

<sup>79</sup> <http://www.orient.pu.ru/old/Library/mscr2005/compilev.html>, last visited 01-02-2008

Hatto himself points out that V.V. Barthold, the most authoritative historian on Central Asia since the late nineteenth century, knew of the Majmu (and discarded it as a hotch-potch of pseudo-history) (Hatto, 1980:324). It therefore seems entirely possible that there is and has been an accessible manuscript of the Majmu itself.

Hatto, however, remains very suspicious of the Majmu and in several articles hints that it may be a forgery. His argument is as follows:

If this bowdlerized Manas-material were proved to be an authentic product of the sixteenth century, the question would arise: How did a Kipchak (Özbek) warrior (Manas), written about in Tajik (Persian), become the paramount hero of the Burut or Kirghiz? To a skeptical mind it seems more probable that we have to do with an eighteenth-century forgery calculated to inspire respect in the Kirghiz tribes for the Kipchak rulers of Khokand (ibid.).

The fact that Manas' father Yakub (Jakip) is a Kipchak in the Majmu makes it unlikely to Hatto that the text was truly sixteenth century. Although Hatto has been adamant in pointing out that Manas was not considered Kyrgyz in the nineteenth century recordings (see chapter four, paragraph 4.4.2), when it comes to the Majmu, he does not accept another ethnonym for Manas. As I have pointed out in paragraph 1.1.2, ethnyonyms have a very complex nature in Central Asia, and names of ethnic groups often come back as the names of tribes (*uruu*) in other ethnic groups. Even today, one of the Kyrgyz tribes is called Kipchak. For contemporary Manaschi Kaba Atabekov, Manas was a Kipchak too, but a Kipchak from the tribe of the Right (*Ong*) Kyrgyz. If Yakub is called a Kipchak in the Majmu, then, this does not mean that the Manas tale was annexed by a different ethnic group for political reasons. Also the fact that the Majmu is written in Farsi does not mean it has to be a forgery. In a multi-lingual environment it is no anomaly that an originally Turkic tale is told (or written down) in Farsi as well. Hatto's argument that a tale written in Tajik is not likely to have become a Kyrgyz epic only works if one assumes the Majmu (or its oral transmittance) was the source for the Kyrgyz epic. It seems more likely that the tale of Manas was the source for the Majmu, written by a Farsi author who used a collection of tales from the region. In that case, there is no reason to believe this cannot have been done in the sixteenth century.

Another interesting reversal of argument concerning the status of the Majmu comes from Kyrgyz Manas scholars Ö. Karaev and S. Musaev. They do not doubt the origin of the Majmu, but question the description of Manas as an historic figure in the manuscript. Karaev and Musaev are convinced that the character of Manas is taken from the fictional

epic tale and not from history, despite the fact that many of the people who are described as Manas' allies are historic figures. Also, the fight between Manas (Kyrgyz) and Joloi (Kalmak) can well be traced back to an 884 A.D. war that is described in Chinese annals (ME I:387). The authors argue that Manas is not an historic figure, because all versions of the fictive epic known today contain elements we also find in the *Majmu-at-Tavarikh*: the father of Manas is called Jakip, his home is in Talas, he is assisted by forty men, and Joloi is one of his main enemies (ibid.). As they regard the present-day Manas epic as fictional, the *Majmu* has to be fictional as well. Interesting as this is, there is always the possibility that the Manas epic and the *Majmu-at-Tavarikh* are both based on a similar source – perhaps the oral transmission of 'historic facts'.

As it is, the question of why the *Majmu-at-Tavarikh* raises so much controversy seems more interesting than the question of its status as a sixteenth-century history account. It appears to trip up suppositions that scholars are not easily inclined to give up on. Hatto had a firm idea of the nineteenth-century texts as being the most authentic ones, which may have been an obstacle to welcome an even older source. The reasons for Musaev and Karaev to hold on to the notion that Manas was a fictional character are up for speculation as well. First of all, they worked in an academic world that questioned folk beliefs and substituted them with a 'scientific' perspective. The idea that Manas was fictional fitted this perspective better than the idea that he was real. Secondly, their insistence on the fictional nature of Manas may have rendered the epic less liable to accusations of 'bourgeois nationalism'. An historic figure would have been a stronger symbol for nationalist forces, and thus more dangerous to the Soviet regime.

In 1995, the *Majmu* was presented in another light at the 'Manas 1,000' festival's scientific symposium. By this time, the *Majmu* had become proof that Manas had been a historic person. O. Karayev states that:

We can derive from the contents of the 'Majmu-at-Tavarikh' that Manas hero was a real figure and had become a legend long before the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Karyev in Koichuev et.al., 1995:19).

Another scholar, E. Eraliev, even claims that the author of the *Majmu* was Kyrgyz. He calls the author Saipadin Aksylyk instead of the generally used Sheif ad-Din Aksikent and claims that the author's surname indicates that he is from the town Aksy:

The word 'Aksylyk', or 'Aksesikenti', points to the birthplace of the author – the town of Akseket. This word is found only in Kyrgyz. Later this toponym was shortened to 'Aksy'. Some historical sources testify that this town was the center of

the nomads' territory (i.e. Kyrgyz – E.Z), and was one of the biggest town in the Ferghana valley in the 11<sup>th</sup> century (Eraliev in Koichuev et.al., 1995:17).

This trend of drawing things into the realm of the Kyrgyz was widespread during my fieldwork – I was often told that the American Natives were originally Kyrgyz. Mathijs Pelkmans mentions an example of the same line of thought of a convert Christian Kyrgyz pastor in Bishkek, who is convinced that the Kyrgyz were descendents of one of the lost tribes of Israel. He found proof in the similarities between the Old Testament and the Manas epic, most notably in the semblance of personal names. The name of Manas' father Jakip resembles Jacob, who in the book Genesis is said to adopt as his native son his grandson Manasseh. According to the pastor, the people of the Manasseh tribe (the Kyrgyz, that is) passed on biblical stories and transformed them to the Manas epic (Pelkmans, 2007:893).

For Eraliev, the fact that nomads lived in a town is enough to conclude that the town belonged to the Kyrgyz. Eraliev's assessment of the Majmu should be seen in the light of Kyrgyz nationalism. That he is a 'Kyrgyz patriot' shows blatantly in his conclusive words:

We think that a detailed and accurate genealogy of the Kyrgyz can be done only by a Kyrgyz national (ibid.).

### 3.1.2 Recordings by Chokan Chingizovich Valikhanov

The second manuscript that tells the tale of Manas, and this time in its poetic form, was written in 1856 by Chokan Valikhanov. This recording was made in the context of Tsarist Russia's advance in Central Asia, and Valikhanov's biography provides a lively picture of this context.

Chokan Valikhanov was a grandson of Vali, the last khan of the Kazakh Middle Horde. When Vali died, the Tsarist government decided not to appoint a new khan, but to bring the lands of the Middle Horde under direct Russian control (*Chokan*, 1966:25). The children of Vali's first wife were averse to Russian rule, but his second wife and her children were on good terms with the Russian authorities. One of these children was Chingiz, the father of Chokan. At the age of 16, he was sent to a Russian school by his mother, and became one of the first Kazakhs who knew Russian well. In 1834, at the age of 23, he was appointed 'senior sultan' of the newly formed Aman-Karagay district, which was later renamed to Kushmurun. One year later, his first son Chokan was born.



Chokan spent his early childhood in the fort of Kushmurun and in Sïmbïret, where the family lived in a house similar to the dwellings of Russian landowners of moderate means (ibid.:26). In his childhood, Chokan was surrounded by influences from both East and West. At Kushmurun he met Russian topographers and geodesists who paid long visits to the fort. But he also spent time with his paternal grandmother Aygan, who told him many Kazakh legends and stories of the recent past. Chokan received an Eastern education at the Kazakh primary school in Kushmurun. He became literate in Chagatai Turkish, which used the Arabic script, learned to speak Arabic and Persian and developed a love for drawing (Mackenzie in Wiczynski, 1986 vol.41:165). When he was 12, he was educated in Western fashion at the Siberian Cadet Corps at Omsk, which was then considered one of the best educational institutions in Siberia. In the seven years he spent here, Valikhanov studied history, geography, literature and languages, with an emphasis on Asia and Kazakhstan. He also learned geometry, topography and architecture. He was the only Kazakh at the school and proved to be a bright student, which yielded him the praise of many of his teachers and the jealousy of some of his fellow students.

Chokan graduated in 1853. He remained in Omsk and was attached to the Governor-General of West Siberia. Although many of the officers and officials in Omsk treated the Kazakhs with contempt, Chokan was warmly accepted into the world of the intelligentsia, where he befriended many, including the exiled writer Dostoyevski (*Chokan*, 1966:27). Dostoyevski encouraged him in his intention to help his people and wrote: ‘Remember that you are the first Kirghiz<sup>80</sup> to be fully educated in the European way’ (Mackenzie, 1986:166).

From 1854 until 1856, Chokan Valikhanov participated in various military expeditions to the South. In 1856, he joined a military and scientific expedition to Lake İssikköl where he assisted in a topographical survey, collected flora and fauna and transcribed folk legends and poems, among which a part of the Manas. On his return, Valikhanov worked on his field-notes and wrote about the early history of the Kyrgyz. Through his acquaintance with the famous geographer and ethnographer P.P. Semenov Tian-Shanski<sup>81</sup>, Valikhanov was elected a member of the Russian Geographical Society in St. Petersburg in 1857, at the age of 22 (*Chokan*, 1966:28).

---

<sup>80</sup> In the nineteenth century, the word Kirgiz (also transliterated to Kirghiz) was used for what are now the Kazakhs. The present-day Kyrgyz were referred to as Kara-Kirgiz or Dikokamenye Kirgiz (see chapter four, paragraph 4.4.2).

<sup>81</sup> A nickname after the mountains he explored.

In 1858, Valikhanov went on a trip to Kashkar. The journey's goal was twofold: Chokan was to gain political and military intelligence (an uprising against the Chinese was in progress, and the Russians wanted to know if there was any British influence in the area) and to collect scholarly material on this area which had not been visited by Europeans since the early seventeenth century. As a Kazakh, Valikhanov was the perfect person for the job. He travelled disguised as a Central Asian merchant, but because of his background in Russian military education he knew how to gather the desired information. In the Summer of 1858, the caravan moved slowly through the lands of the Kyrgyz Bugu tribe. Valikhanov arrived in Kashkar in October 1858, where he stayed until March 1859. He had to leave when he was almost exposed as a Russian agent (ibid.:29).

Two years after his return, Valikhanov went to St. Petersburg to report at various Ministries and to present some of the unique manuscripts he brought from Kashkar. He stayed in St. Petersburg to work in the Asiatic Department of the Foreign Ministry, where he compiled maps, worked on his field material and gave many lectures. Soon, however, Valikhanov was diagnosed with tuberculosis and on his doctor's advice he went back home to try and recover. When he returned he was welcomed warmly in the settlement of his relatives. But Chokan himself was shocked by - in the words of the Kazakh Soviet scholar Margulan - 'the backwardness of his own people, the despotism of the rich Kazakh and the rapacity of some of the local Russian officials' (ibid.:30). A year later he returned to Omsk and went on another Russian military expedition in 1864. During this campaign, Valikhanov was deeply upset by the suffering of the Kazakhs at the hands of the Tsarist troops. He did not return to Omsk but moved to the settlement of a friend. Here, he married his friend's sister. In April 1865, at the age of 29, Chokan Valikhanov died of tuberculosis.

Although during his lifetime, Valikhanov had received ample recognition for his scholarly contributions, in the 1960s, when the centenary of his death approached, his star rose to become an icon of Kazakh modernity. Between 1961 and 1967, a five-volume collection of Valikhanov's published and unpublished works, edited by A. Margulan, was issued in the Soviet Union. In 1965, commemorative celebrations for Valikhanov were held in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Moscow. This surge of interest in Valikhanov was opportune because his life and political orientations agreed with the political climate of the 1960s. Although he had been of blue blood (or white bone, as the Kazakh and Kyrgyz say), his association with the Russians, and especially dissidents like Dostoyevski, made him a suitable role model for Kazakh Soviet citizens. In an article in the *Central Asian Review*,

presented as an English summary of the biographical sketch by the Margulan at the beginning of volume one of Valikhanov's collected works, we read that:

Valikhanov was first and foremost a Kazakh patriot. At the same time he valued highly the Russian link and saw the advantages the more advanced Russian culture could bring to his backward people (ibid.:31).

In 1985, 150 years after his birth, a memorial museum was built for Valikhanov, close to his burial site in Altın-Emel. In the days of perestroika and independence, Valikhanov remained a highly esteemed scholar and a source of Kazakh national pride.

In Kyrgyzstan, Valikhanov is appreciated for his ethnographic and historic material on the Kyrgyz, and especially for his recording of an episode from the Manas epic. Although Valikhanov did not elaborate on the circumstances surrounding this recording in his articles and diaries, some basic information can be extracted from his texts. We already know that during his first expedition to Kyrgyz area, Valikhanov met a Manas narrator. This can be found in his *Journal of the Expedition to Lake Issyk 1856*:

On 26<sup>th</sup> [May 1856] a bard [*pevets*] was with me, a (...) Kirgiz *ırchī*. He knows the poem of Manas. The language of the poem is far easier to grasp than the colloquial. Manas, the hero of the poem, is a Nogay: what an intrepid hunter for collecting wives! His whole life consists of fighting and the search for lovely girls. Yet his feelings are not altogether oriental – he often rails at his own father, raids his cattle and treats him with gross indelicacy. This is strange. For in general all nomadic peoples esteem age... (Hatto, 1977:93).

Valikhanov does not mention that he recorded any epic recitals at this encounter. It is thus not clear whether the text was written down this time, or during his next visit to Kyrgyz lands in 1858, when he was on his way to Kashkar. Either way, by 1860, Valikhanov wrote in his *Sketches from Jungaria* that:

An episode of the poem of Manas, namely the memorial feast [*trizna*] for Kokutay-khan<sup>82</sup>, was written down by me at the dictation of a Kirgiz rhapsode. It is probably the first Kirgiz discourse to have been transferred to paper (ibid.).

Arthur Hatto seems convinced that Valikhanov did not do the actual writing himself, but that he had a scribe. Unfortunately, he does not explain how he reached this conclusion. Just as unfortunate is Valikhanov's omission of the names of the singer he encountered and the singer whose Manas version he recorded. Margulan deems it likely that the latter was

---

<sup>82</sup> Valikhanov wrote this in Russian. As Russian does not have the sound ö, he transliterated *Kökötöi* to *Kokutay*.

Nazar Bolot, who lived at Lake İssikköl from 1828-1893. The reason to assume this was that the K  k  t  i episode recorded by Valikhanov is very close to the one that Abdirakhmanov recorded from Nazar's pupil Jandeke (ibid.:94). Hatto challenges this idea by comparing the version recorded by Valikhanov with Jandeke's version and a number of other later versions. The similarities that Margulan speaks of are not all that striking in this comparison – although Hatto finds them remarkable enough to assume the bard of Valikhanov and Jandeke were from the same 'school' (ibid.:96). Daniel Prior, however, brings forth 'folkloric information recently brought to light' that raises Nazar's authorship 'to a high degree of certainty' (Prior, 2002:61). In 1996, Omor Erketanov published an interview he held in 1949 with a story-teller called Kayduu, a nephew of Nazar. This Kayduu told Erketanov what his uncle had told him:

'In 1856 our people (*el*) the Ar  k were in summer-pastures at Karkara. Our people (*el*) Seyitkazi formed a separate encampment. When Toksaba was chief, Cossacks and a learned young Kazakh fellow came to the camp and stayed at the place of Oljobay, son of Toksaba, and they pitched a separate yurt for them and treated them respectfully. One day they summoned me. I was close to 30 years old; it was the time when I was coming into my own reciting Manas, and I recited for two or three days. That fellow had capulets, and he was a tall, narrow-faced, rather handsome fellow; they called him Chokan, and they sat making written recordings, and it seems he drew a picture of me in pencil. We later lost the picture he had drawn in our moving about and camping' (Prior, 2002:62).

The encampment where Valikhanov met his first bard was situated on a meadow at San Tash ('Many Stones') in the T  p area at the eastern shore of Lake İssikk  l. This place was visited by the Russian geographer Petr Semenov Tien-Shianski a year later, who wrote down the legend he heard about the pile of stones that gave the area its name. In the fifteenth century the conqueror Timur (Tamerlane) went on a campaign from Samarkand to the East. He and his troops passed Lake İss  k-k  l, where Timur ordered each of his warriors to pick up a stone and put them on a heap. On the way back, each surviving warrior was ordered to take a stone from the heap. What was left was a pile that represented the number of losses, and that remained for ever their memorial (Semenov, 1998:148). In 1997, I also visited this place, together with Manaschi Talantaali and a number of his friends. They told me the very same legend, with the added interpretation that the large number of stones left at San Tash indicated how severely Timur's army had suffered.

Near the site, there was another smaller monument: a configuration of three small rocks in the middle of a meadow. My companions told me that this was the place where Valikhanov sat when he recorded the tale of Manas. Talantaali wanted us to have a picture taken at this site, for if once we were a famous Manaschī - scholar duo, this picture would become of historical value (see figure 3.1).



*Figure 3.1 Talantaali Bakchiev and me at Valikhanov's monument*

The monument had been erected during a festival in 1996 called *San-tash-140*, which commemorated Valikhanov's visit 140 years previously. Daniel Prior was the instigator of this festival, after he had located the exact place where Valikhanov met his first bard. This discovery was made at the end of the arduous journey on horseback, where he followed the itinerary in the Manas recital that Valikhanov had written down. In the article that describes this journey, *Bok-murun's Itinerary Ridden*, Prior describes how he used Valikhanov's drawings and local knowledge to find the exact location of the camp in which Valikhanov met with a Manas teller:

Inquiries among local herders produced an informant, Kubat Dūshenbiyev, a life-long inhabitant of the Tüp river valley. (...) To my knowledge he is the first person to have correctly (1) fixed the location of the drawing and (2) identified the dark

object in the foreground as the historically and folklorically significant San-tash kurgan (Prior, 1998:275).

The *San-tash-140* festival entailed a scholarly conference in Bishkek and a return to the place that had been rediscovered by Prior in 1994 (Prior, 2002:247). A stone monument was unveiled on a nearby spot (ibid.). Great Manaschī Shaabai Azizov performed at the festival, on Prior's invitation. When Talantaali and I spoke about the monument, he did not appreciate Prior's assertion that he had found the place. He told me that Manaschīs and other Kyrgyz knew about this place before, as Valikhanov had indicated himself in his diaries, and that Prior was wrong in assuming this knowledge had been lost. Daniel Prior explained to me that the novelty of his discovery was that he had found the exact location, and not merely a general indication.

The 3319 lines of Manas recital recorded by Valikhanov were not published in his time. In Valikhanov's days, publication of his work on Manas was limited to his résumé of the story of the Manas epic and other notes on the Kyrgyz epic tradition that were published in his Russian book *Sketches from Jungaria (Ocherki Jungarii)* in 1861. However, a copy of the original Manas recording that was deemed lost was discovered in the archives of the Leningrad Academy of Sciences by professor Margulan in 1964 (ibid.:vi). The manuscript was written in a post-Chagatay Arabic hand. Margulan published the copy in a Cyrillic alphabet in the Kazakh SSR in 1971 in a book called '*Shokan jame Manas*'. In 1973, he published a Kazakh translation of this manuscript (ME I:338). Margulan also sent a photocopy and a microfilm of the manuscript to the British professor Arthur Hatto (Hatto, 1977:vii), who made a transcription of the Arabic to the Latin alphabet and gave an English translation in prose. His book '*The Memorial Feast for Kökötöy-Khan (Kökököydün aşı) – A Kirghiz Epic Poem*' published in 1977 contains an elaborate commentary and eleven appendices on the linguistic and social background of the text<sup>83</sup>. Not before 1996, a transliteration to the modern Kyrgyz alphabet was published by T. Chorotegin. The editor that started the work, K. Botoyarov, passed away two years before its publication.

---

<sup>83</sup> Interestingly, his book contains 3251 lines of epic poetry, whereas the Manas Encyclopaedia speaks of 3319 lines.

### 3.1.3 Recordings by Friedrich Wilhelm Radloff

Around the same time that Valikhanov travelled in the northern Kyrgyz territories, another scholar visited the area. Friedrich Wilhelm Radloff, also known under his Russian name Vasilii Vasilevich Radlov, recorded Kyrgyz poetry and Manas tales in 1862 and 1869 (Hatto, 1990:IX, Kliashhorniy, 1982:151). Radloff was born in Berlin in 1837. At the age of 21 he moved to Russia, where he was a German and Latin teacher in Barnaul, a city in Siberia about 1,000 km north of Kyrgyzstan. Radloff worked here from 1859 until 1871. During this time he went on excursions to Kyrgyz territory and undertook fieldtrips in Siberia and Mongolia. In 1884 he became a member of the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences, where he held different positions until his death in 1918. Radloff was a hard worker. He travelled to numerous places, published 150 works, and during his years as a teacher in Siberia, he worked well into the night, sparing at most three to four hours for sleep (Hatto, 1990:IX).

Radloff's trips among the Kyrgyz took place in 1862, when he visited the Bugu tribe at the Tekes River<sup>84</sup> and in 1869 when he visited the Sarı-Bagış on the south-side of Lake İssikköl and the Soltu south and east of the town Tokmak<sup>85</sup> (Radloff, 1885:II). He recorded a number of episodes from Manas, the tale of Joloi Kan, the tale of Er Töshtük and a number of other songs. He published his recordings in Russian and German translations in 1885. The Russian edition is called *Obraztsy Narodnoi Literatury Severnykh Tyurkskikh Plemen, Chast V: Narechie Dikokamnennykh Kirgizov*. The German edition was translated by Radloff himself and was titled *Proben der Volkslitteratur der Nördlichen Türkischen Stämme, V. Theil: der Dialect der Kara-Kirgisen*. In these books, Radloff presented the original Kyrgyz text in an alphabet of his own devising (Prior, 1996:7)<sup>86</sup>. He chose to write the translated text in verse, thus staying true to the poetic nature of the epic. Reading the verses aloud gives a good impression of the rhythm and atmosphere of the oral performance. The episodes from Manas that he published are:

- \* Birth of Manas
- \* How Almambet became a Muslim, leaves Kökchö and moves to Manas
- \* Battle between Manas and Kökchö. Manas marries Khanikey. Manas' death and resurrection
- \* Bok Murun

---

<sup>84</sup> The Tekes River lies presently in Kazakhstan, to the north of lake İssikköl.

<sup>85</sup> Today, the city called Tokmok lies approx. 60 km east of Bishkek.

<sup>86</sup> In the reissue of the Proben in 1965 in the DDR, although it claims to be an 'unchanged reissue of the original edition 1866-1907', the Kyrgyz original in Radloff's own alphabet is absent.

- \* Közkaman
- \* Semetei's Birth
- \* Semetei

Unfortunately, just like Valikhanov, Radloff did not provide the names of any of the narrators he encountered. In fact, we do not even know how many different narrators were involved in Radloff's collection. The final presentation of the tales in his book suggests a chronological tale, but this is not how Radloff collected them. The first poem, *Birth of Manas*, was recorded in 1869 (Hatto, 1990:3) from a Sarï-Bagış narrator. All other tales were recorded among the Bugu, during his visits in 1862 and 1869 (ibid.:XII).

The Preface to the *Manas* tales in the *Proben V* provides a wealth of information and novel insights on oral epic poetry among the Kyrgyz. In his travel journey *Aus Siberien. Losse Blätter aus meinem Tagebuche*, compiled in 1884, we also find a number of interesting observations on Kyrgyz oral poetry. Radloff saw the Kyrgyz as a people in the 'epic period' (Radloff, 1885:III), or even the 'true epic period' (ibid.:XXIII), comparable to the Greek people at the time when the Trojan legends still lived as unwritten, true folk poetry. Radloff therefore wished to describe the circumstances of this epic period among the Kyrgyz, hoping to contribute to the study of texts, and in particular to the unsolved 'epische Frage' (epic question). The epic question, or Homeric question, concerns the identity of Homer and the authorship of the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*. Radloff argued that this debate arose because none of the arguing parties understood the true nature of the Greek bard. He explained that both Greek and Kyrgyz narrators belong to the royal court and work under the authority of a muse, 'i.e. the inner singing power of singers' (ibid.). They have the exclusive right to sing songs and do not recite famous songs, because these do not exist in the 'true epic period'. Greek and Kyrgyz narrators do not sing the songs of others, but compose verses themselves.

In the light of this argument, Radloff has given a detailed and apt description of the processes of oral composition. This description has been picked up in later years by Milman Parry, who designed the oral-formulaic hypothesis that has become accepted as the solution to the Homeric question. Parry was inspired by Radloff's observations on oral composition and quoted them in full in German in a footnote to his article *Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse-Making. II. The Homeric language as the Language of Oral Poetry*.

It was exactly this passage that gripped me when I read it in the courtyard of Kaba Atabekov's homestead. This was the first text I read about the *Manas* that did not stop at



wondering about the capability of Manaschīs to learn such an enormous epic by heart, but explained the process of improvisation instead. Hatto also found this passage important enough to give an English translation in an appendix to his edition of Valikhanov's text. I shall therefore not withhold it to the reader of this study. The (\*) indicate where Parry's quote begins and ends.

A bard possessed of any skill whatever always improvises his songs on the spur of the moment so that he is totally incapable of performing a song twice in identical fashion. \* But do not believe that such improvisation means a new poem each time. The bard-improviser is in exactly the same case as a man who improvises at the pianoforte. Just as the latter pieces together runs, transitions, motifs into a pattern expressive of a given mood as the moment prompts him and so assembles something novel from what has long been familiar to him, so with the singer of epic songs. From extensive practice in performance he has whole series of narrative elements to hand (if I may so express myself) which he threads together to suit his needs in the course of narration. Such narrative elements are descriptions of certain incidents and situations, like the Birth of a Hero, the Growing-up of a Hero, Praise of Weapons, Preparations for Battle, the Din on Battle, Altercations between Heroes prior to Battle, Descriptions of Persons or Steeds, Characteristics of Famous Heroes, Praise of a Bride's Beauty, Descriptions of a Dwelling, A Yurt, a Feast, Invitations to a Feast, Death of a Hero, Descriptions of a Landscape, Nightfall, Daybreak, and many others. The bard's art consists solely in marshalling all these ready-made narrative elements in the order demanded by the course of events and in linking them together with new verses. \* Now, in his songs, the bard can mobilize all the above-named elements in a great variety of ways. He can sketch one and the same scene in a few strokes or depict it more fully or enter into a detailed description of epic breadth and amplitude. The greater the number of different elements the bard has at his command, the more varied his poem will be and the longer he will be able to go on singing without wearying his listeners with the monotony of his evocations. The measure of a bard's talent is given by the multiplicity of narrative elements and his skill in assembling them. An adroit bard can recite any theme, any tale that is asked of him, extempore, once the order of events is clear to him. When I inquired of one of the most competent bards I ever knew if he could sing this or that song he replied: 'I can sing every song there is, because God has implanted this gift of song in my heart. He lays words on my

tongue so that I do not have to seek them. I have learnt none of my songs, they all well up from inside me!’ ... (Radloff in Hatto, 1977:269-270).

Radloff placed the *Manas* in a scope of world epics by comparing it to Homer’s epic tales and the Finnish *Kalevala*. The comparison with the latter led Radloff to anticipate on the writing down and publication of the *Manas* epic. The *Kalevala* was an epic that was composed as a coherent tale from many different Finnish folk tales by Elias Lönnrot. Contrary to the *Manas*, it had never existed as an orally narrated epic. Radloff was an admirer of Lönnrot’s work and refuted criticism that he should have given the rough version of the recorded tales instead of polishing them into an epic. Radloff explained that the Finns had passed the ‘true epic period’ by the time the *Kalevala* was composed. In the epic period, the connection between the songs lives in every individual. However, the size of the complete epic is so extensive in the epic period that the whole can only be mirrored in parts (Radloff, 1885:XXIV). The project of writing down an epic, however, can only be accomplished by a single epic singer, Radloff holds. In the case of the Finns, who had passed the epic period, the compiler needs the help of many poets who can provide a part of the whole. If the compiler is in the epic period, however, he has to be a famous bard, who has internalised an extensive mass of images (ibid.). Lönnrot’s collection of tales should be seen as the creation of a single poet, Radloff argued. He could have written down separate verses, but then he would not have achieved the creation of a complete epic (*Gesammtepos*) (ibid.).

Hatto, who translated Radloff’s collected *Manas* verses from Kyrgyz to English, has much admiration for Radloff. In the course of what he described as monotonous translation work, however, Hatto often also felt frustrated by Radloff’s shortcomings in translations and lexicography. In his introduction to *The Manas of Wilhelm Radloff*, Hatto puts his frustrations in perspective:

Had Radloff looked back and collated as often as the present editor has done, some of the other unique monuments he has bequeathed to us would have been lost forever. (...) the gambles Radloff took on the printed pages were of the same order as those he took in the wilds of Central Asia to fetch it home (Hatto, 1990:X).

Hatto claims that Radloff’s visits to the Kyrgyz lands were too brief to gain a deep knowledge of the Kyrgyz lexica and the social background informing them. This makes it only the more surprising that Radloff came to such profound insights in oral epic improvisation.

Radloff is seen as a pioneer in Manas studies by Manas scholars in Soviet and contemporary Kyrgyzstan as well. In 1969, the Soviet scholar Victor Zhirmunsky begins a bibliographical survey which complements Nora Chadwick's *Oral Epics of Central Asia* with:

The foundation of a systematic study of Turkic folk-lore and epics was laid by V.V. Radlov (1837-1918) in his *Specimens of Turkic Literature* (1866-96), published by the Russian Academy of Sciences.

And in the compilation of important Manas texts that was published as part of the 1995 'Manas 1,000' celebrations, Radloff's Preface to *Proben V* is the third text in line, after an introduction by Musaev and an article by Chingiz Aitmatov. When I was reading this book in Kaba Atabekov's courtyard, he said to me: 'You read on, my child, so you will become as great as Radlov and the others!'

### **3.2 Publications of the Manas During Soviet Times**

#### **3.2.1 Kayum Miftakov**

Not long after the Socialist Soviet revolution had taken place, new recordings of the Manas epic were made by the folklorist Kayum Miftakov. Miftakov himself was a Bashkir<sup>87</sup> and was born in 1882 in a village near Ufa<sup>88</sup>. He worked as a teacher in several places in present-day Kazakhstan, meanwhile collecting oral literature among Bashkir, Tatar and Kazakh people. In 1916 he began collecting Kyrgyz oral material, and in 1920 he moved to Talas (ME II:108) to take up the position of school inspector (Prior, 2000:12). Until his death in 1949 in Frunze, he collected material from all over Kyrgyzstan. Next to many different songs and stories, he collected Manas episodes from at least ten different Manas tellers (ibid.).

Miftakov is mostly remembered for his contact with Sagimbai Orozbekov that led to the recording of a large number of episodes of the Manas. In 1922, Miftakov travelled with Saparbai Sooronbai uulu to Narin, where they met İbırayım Abdırakhmanov and Chaki Kaptagai uulu. These men formed the 'circle for collection of folk literature of the Black Kyrgyz' (*Kara Kirgız el adabiyatın jıynoo iyrimi*) (ME II:353), under the leadership of Miftakov. Miftakov started to record Sagimbai's Manas recitals, and then handed it over to Abdırakhmanov. These recordings were the basis for a number of major government-instigated publications in the decades that followed.

---

<sup>87</sup> The Bashkirs are a Turkic people.

<sup>88</sup> Nowadays, Ufa is the capital of Bashkortostan, a federal republic of Russia just west of Kazakhstan

If we want to learn about Miftakov's relationship with the Soviet government, the *Manas* Encyclopaedia turns out to be an unusable source. Although it was written after independence from the Soviet Union, the compilers of the Encyclopaedia often stick to the tradition of staying out of matters that might be politically sensitive. The author of the entry on Miftakov, A. Tokombaeva, only mentions that Miftakov studied at the Rasulya religious school. From Daniel Prior we learn that this was a Jadid<sup>89</sup> school. However, it is not clear in what sort of schools he taught when he became a teacher. As for his position as school inspector, neither Tokombaeva nor Prior explain whether he worked for the Soviet government or another organ, or how his Jadid-background influenced his relationship with the Soviet government. We do know that Miftakov survived the purges of the 1930s and continued to collect folklore.

After his encounter with Sagımbai, Miftakov went on to other places to collect *Manas* and other tales. He wrote down recitals of Togolok Moldo's *Semetei* and Moldobasan Musulmakulov's version of the epic tales *Jangı-Bayışh* and *Er Kurmanbek* (ME II:108). In 1923, he spent four months in Talas recording *Manas* episodes from various *Manaschıs*. In the years 1936-1941, he wrote down fifty thousand lines of *Semetei* told by Jangıbai Kojekov. In 1947, he went to Osh to record tales, many of them from *Manas* and *Semetei*. In 1949, Miftakov died in Frunze (ibid.).

### 3.2.2 İbırayım Abdırakhmanov

The first Kyrgyz person to engage in *Manas* collecting was İbırayım Abdırakhmanov. He was born in 1888 in the region that is presently called Jeti-Ögüz rayon, on the south-eastern banks of Lake İssikköl. In his youth he became acquainted with *Manas* telling on long winter nights when the entire village assembled to listen to and participate in *Manas* recitals (see paragraph 2.2.4). In 1905 he graduated from the Jadid 'New Order' (*Jangı Tartıp*) school in Karakol and began to work as a teacher in Jeti-Ögüz (ME II:353). In 1916, he became a teacher in At-Bashı, a district town in Narın (Narın Oblusu Entsiklopedia, 1998:118). In 1922, Abdırakhmanov met Miftakov, and on his order he wrote down *Manas* stories told by Sagımbai Orozbekov. Between 1922 and 1926, Abdırakhmanov spent many hours converting the words of Sagımbai to paper in Arabic

---

<sup>89</sup> The 'New Method' or Jadid schools offered standardised, disciplined education of both religious and worldly curricula (Khalid, 1998:12). The Jadids believed that reform of Central Asian culture and society was needed if it was to survive the challenges of the modern world (ibid.:1). The Jadids' romantic notions of nationhood incited a stress on vernacular language teacher (ibid.:211). Such an attitude could of course also stimulate the collection of folklore.

script. Miftakov praised him for his exceptional skill in writing at singing speed (ibid., Prior, 2000:13). The recording process was hampered by Sagımbai's health, who suffered from a progressive nervous disorder. The team was also hindered by a lack of financial means, which meant that they could not organise a fixed place for the recording sessions, and they had to move between Kochkor and At-Bashı. As they could not afford to pay Sagımbai adequately for his work either, his family continued to live in poverty (ibid.)<sup>90</sup>.

In 1924, Abdırakhmanov and Sagımbai were called to Tashkent to present themselves to the Party's newly formed scientific committee. Prior tells us that:

A young Kirghiz official, Khusain Karasayev (1902-1997) received the pair coldly and did nothing to help them. Sagımbay, on his part, never recovered from the immediate blow of this snub. It is significant that when the two men returned to Kirghizia empty-handed, the first episode the bard narrator was the "Great Campaign" (*çon kazat*), the culmination of Manas's struggle for victory over the Infidel. One senses a vengeful mood. (...) Sagımbay's willingness for the work, as well as his powers of memory, continued to decline until the cessation of recordings in 1926 (ibid.).

The Manas Encyclopaedia agrees that Abdırakhmanov and Sagımbai had 'cool relations' with the Turkstan Science Committee, and that they received very little help in overcoming their difficulties (ME II:354).

Abdırakhmanov continued to collect Manas material after the sessions with Sagımbai had ended. In commission for the Institute for Language and Literature, he worked with Sayakbai Karalaev and wrote down his tales of Manas, Semetei, Seitek and Er Töshtük (ibid.). In these days, he worked in several schools in Narın oblast. From 1932-1935 he was the head of the Narın orphanage (Narın Oblusu Entsiklopedia, 1998:119). In 1935, he was employed at the Language and Literature Institute of the Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences, where he remained until 1960 (ibid.).

From 1940 to 1945, Abdırakhmanov worked on the tales that he had collected from Sagımbai, Sayakbai, Togolok Moldo and Akmat Rısmendenov, and had them published in chapbook editions. The genre of chapbooks became popular in Europe in the sixteenth century. The term is now used to denote low-cost hard copy production of poetry that is found all over the world. The chapbooks that Abdırakhmanov compiled were published in the so-called Manas Series (*Manas Seriaları*). They deal with separate episodes from the

---

<sup>90</sup> See chapter two, paragraph 2.5

Manas, such as ‘The Childhood of Manas’ by Sagımbai Orozbekov, ‘The Tale of Khanikei’ by Sayakbai Karalaev, ‘Semetei’s Return from Bukhar to Talas’ by Togolok Moldo and ‘Ürgönch’ by Akmat Rısmendenov. Other compilers, such as Jakishev, Rakhmatullin, Beishekeev and Malikov also published a chapbook in the Manas Series. Abdırakhmanov published seven.

Abdırakhmanov also started to write his own version of the Manas. This earned him the favourable comparison to Elias Lönnrot, the compiler of the Finnish epic the Kalevala by Kyrgyzstani Manas scholars (Prior, 2000:12). Radloff had predicted a few decades back that it would take an active performer of the epic who had a large repertoire of epic material to match the epic effort of Lönnrot. However, Abdırakhmanov’s version never made it to the status that Lönnrot’s Kalevala had gained. Up to this day, it has not even been published (Narın Oblusu Entsiklopedia, 1998:119).

An interesting question remains: why did a man like Abdırakhmanov, well-known Kyrgyz Manas collector of the first hour, an educated man and Manaschi himself, not gain a higher position within the newly founded scientific community? In 1948, Abdırakhmanov became a member of the USSR Writers’ Union, and according to the Narın Oblast Encyclopaedia, he was ‘awarded with medals’ (ibid.). However, he never gained a leading position in the academic world, nor did he receive the task of (chief) editor for important Manas publications. Daniel Prior too is surprised by the lack of acknowledgement for Abdırakhmanov’s work:

Surprisingly, almost nothing has been written about the influence of this pivotal figure upon the creations of his fellow bards (Prior, 1996:12).

It seems likely that Abdırakhmanov was seen as an amateur folklore collector, indispensable for departments of folklore studies all over the world, but lower in status than the scholarly staff. At a decisive Manas conference in 1952 (see paragraph 3.2.4), Abdırakhmanov was the only speaker who spoke in Kyrgyz instead of Russian (MEI:315). He may have done this out of patriotism, but it seems more likely that he did not master Russian well. In an article by Musaev in the 1978 publication of the Manas of Sagımbai, the image of Abdırakhmanov as an amateur collector shimmers through:

It is hard to say to what degree the main scribe of Sagımbai’s version, İbırayım Abdırakhmanov, answered to the demands of scholarly precision. It is doubtful whether in those days this man was aware of the necessity of precision. We think that there was no-one who demanded such precision from this man. But this man, who was well-known among the Kyrgyz intelligentsia by the name ‘Moldoke’, was

known for his neatness and we can trust that he generally put the words on paper just as they came out of the mouth of the Manaschī (...) We cannot praise enough the work of the men like Kayum Miftakov, who initiated this work with enthusiasm (...) and Ībīrayīm Abdirakhmanov who succeeded in finishing it (Musaev in Manas 1978:281-282).

Abdirakhmanov died in 1967, in the village Pogranichnik. This village is called Kazibek today and happens to be the village where I spent my first fieldwork months. On our way to a wedding anniversary, my host mother showed me the house where he had lived the last years of his life. She told me he did not have any children, because he had been in love with someone else's wife. My host father told me Abdirakhmanov's life story in this way:

Abdirakhmanov studied Arabic at an Islamic school in Kashkar, in China. This was why his name was Ībīrayīm. When the Soviets came, he became teacher at the school in this village, and later a school inspector. He went to At-Bashī for that, and in 1928 he left for Bishkek. There he began to write down various versions of the Manas from the Great Manaschīs. He wrote very quickly while they were narrating. First he used the Arabic, later the Cyrillic script. He had to write very fast, but he had beautiful handwriting! After his pension he came back to this village and here he died. I will show you his grave one day. He was from the Cherik tribe, from the Akchubak branch, just like us. But from there he is from a different branch.

### 3.2.3 Institutionalisation

The pioneers of Manas recording worked on their own initiative, with hardly any institutional back-up or restraints. Valikhanov counts as the exception, as his work was part of a Russian military-scientific expedition. However, there seems to have been very little influence by the military on his scholarly work. Until the 1930s, folklore collectors in the Soviet Union had been left to their own devices and they could work relatively undisturbed (Oinas, 1973:45). When the Stalin era commenced, this changed. The production of literature, including folklore collection, was drawn into the structure of the five-year plan. More importantly, the input of Maxim Gorky, writer and a good friend of Lenin, changed the Soviet approach towards folklore, which made it a political tool in building up a socialist society.

In a speech that he gave in 1934 at the first All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, Gorky made a passionate plea for incorporating folklore into socialist culture. He stressed the high artistic value of folklore, the life optimism of folklore, which expresses the

deepest moral aspirations of the masses, and the close connection between folklore and the working conditions of the people (ibid.:46). The consequences of Gorky's speech reached far. In Oinas' words:

(...) it opened the eyes of the rulers of Russia to the significance of folklore as a powerful force to advance communism, and served as a stimulus for them to initiate a large-scale collecting activity (ibid.:47).

The Manas epic was enrolled into the all-encompassing socialist project and its course became directed by party politics. The reassessment of folklore was embedded in a much wider movement that also rehabilitated many Russian writers from the nineteenth century. Folk culture was appropriated by the Centre. Acknowledgement by the Kremlin put a seal of political respectability on the performance of folklore. This new trend led to several activities: an official Manas reciter was appointed at the *Philharmonia* in Frunze, the Manas theme was used to compose an opera, and a Russian translation was initiated.

One of the Russian translators, the Odessa-born poet Semyon Lipkin, presents a lively account of the dangers and diplomacies involved with this task in his article "*Bucharin, Stalin und der Manas. Skandal um ein kirgisches Epos*", which he wrote after his fall to disgrace in the 1980s. The German version of his Russian article was published in 1994 in the literary magazine *Die Neue Rundschau*.

In the article, Lipkin describes that he took part in a competition in the mid-1930s that was set up to find the best translators to convert the Manas into Russian. Many well-known poets participated. To secure a fair selection, all participants were given a code-name. Lipkin's name was Tulpar, the Kyrgyz epic word for a horse with mythical qualities. The competition was won by three men: Mark Tarlovski, Lev Penkovski and Lipkin himself. Their first task was to translate the 30,000 lines of Sagımbai Orozbekov's Great Campaign. At that time, the First Secretary of Kyrgyzstan's Territorial Committee was Belozki, who Lipkin describes as a man who was passionately devoted to bringing an opera house, theatres and a philharmonic concert hall to Kyrgyzstan, because spending time with artists gave him the opportunity to relax from the bloodbaths of the forced collectivisation of the nomads. Belozki was assigned the project of a Russian Manas translation, but was afraid to take the political risk. The Moscow publishing house had received letters from Kyrgyz local orthodox communists, informing with a threatening undertone that the Manas was the work of feudal landlords, an instrument for nationalists which operated secretly and in the open. Lipkin knew nothing of these letters, but the Kyrgyz leadership obviously did. They wanted the Moscow publishing house to take full



responsibility. The publishers for their part waited for an explicit reference from the Kyrgyz leadership. In order to obtain this, the publishing house sent two of the translators, Tarlovski and Lipkin, to Frunze, as independent, non-political players in the field.

In the autumn of 1936, after a long journey, Tarlovski and Lipkin arrived in Frunze. They were taken to the country house (*dacha*) of the Kyrgyz communist party cadres in Ala-Archa, a mountain resort about 40km outside of Frunze. Here they met Nikolai Bukharin, one of the most prominent Bolsheviks. Bukharin had been expelled from the Politburo in 1929 after an attack from Stalin, but was rehabilitated in 1934 and made editor of the government newspaper *Izvestia*. When he heard that the poets Lipkin and Tarlovski had arrived in the *dacha*, Bukharin came over to their rooms to greet them. Lipkin, surprised to find Bukharin here, thoroughly enjoyed the encounter, as Bukharin spoke ‘expressively, free, cheerful and absolutely not woodenly’ (Lipkin, 1994:97). Lipkin said that he and Tarlovski sympathised with Bukharin’s economic policies, but that they were cautious in expressing this.

In the evening, the translators gave a reading of their Russian *Manas* in the Billiard Room. Belozki and Bukharin were present, along with a number of other Russian and Kyrgyz politicians. The Kyrgyz enjoyed the reading and according to Lipkin, they were surprised that the text remained the same in Russian. At the end of the reading, Bukharin got up and spoke, because he knew that was expected of him. He praised the Kyrgyz epic as a great monument of world literature, complimented the translators on their work and announced that a column in the *Izvestia* would be dedicated to the *Manas* epic – which indeed happened. But Bukharin had one question, as he found it hard to believe that the Kyrgyz did not have any form of dance, as is suggested in the epic. Belozki replied that indeed, the Kyrgyz did not dance, and that they had only recently started to develop a dance style. Bukharin was not convinced, however, and Isakaev, the chairman of the People’s Soviet, stood up and declared that the Kyrgyz did have a form of dance; an imitation of a shepherd catching cattle with a lasso. When Bukharin expressed disappointment that he could not see this dance, Isakaev replied: ‘Who said that you cannot see it? You will see and hear it right now!’, and he himself performed the dance for Bukharin and the audience. When the dance was over, Bukharin applauded and called it a night. One year later, he was arrested for conspiring to overthrow the Soviet state. In 1938, he was executed.

Lipkin and Tarlovski returned to Moscow with a letter from Belozki that called for the publication of the Russian translation of the *Manas* as soon as possible. However, when

the proofs were ready, Belozki had been arrested on the accusation of being an enemy of the people, and his letter had become useless. Lipkin was sent back to Kyrgyzstan, together with editor Mosolkov. They arrived in the *dacha* in autumn. The atmosphere had changed, and in one of the newspapers they read:

‘The hated lackey Isakaev has dragged his worth as Communist and Kyrgyz into the mud, when, like a war slave for a drunken bai-manap, he sang and danced for Bukharin – for some pieces of fat beshbarmak<sup>91</sup> of the lord’s table’ (ibid.:101).

The tone of this article was echoed 60 years later by one of my informants from Kazıbek village. He told me that the translation by Lipkin and Tarkovski had been done in an atmosphere of alcohol and women, it was written without any respect for the Manas and was therefore wrong.

The days at the *dacha* were long and tiresome, as there was no entertainment and no transport to the city. After three weeks, Lipkin received a letter, and his heart sank. It was however merely an invitation for him and Mosolkov to appear at the government dais of the celebration of the October Revolution. They were transported to the venue by the only *dacha* visitor who owned a car, Ivan Panfilov<sup>92</sup>. Lipkin and Mosolkov sat at the dais with the entire Kyrgyz government, and found the First Secretary to be very nervous. Panfilov explained that that same morning, the First Secretary of the Central Committee had been arrested. He was allowed to be present at the Revolution celebrations, but a few days later, Lipkin heard that the entire Central Committee was arrested on the accusation of being enemies of the people. Later, they were all executed<sup>93</sup>. Lipkin and Mosolkov went back to Moscow without a concrete assignment.

On their return to Moscow, the publishing house deemed it safer to postpone the publication of the Manas translation. But the epic was not gone from the scene. In the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow, a festival for Kyrgyz art and literature was held, which featured the premiere of an opera based on the Manas. When Lipkin went to see this festival, he met Sayakbai Karalaev for the first time. They became friends, and Lipkin was impressed by the skill and passion of Sayakbai’s recital<sup>94</sup>. At this meeting, Sayakbai told Lipkin: ‘Remember, Semeke, that a Manas singer should have a pure soul. We cannot have

---

<sup>91</sup> Kyrgyz mutton dish

<sup>92</sup> At that time, Panfilov was the military commissar of the Kyrgyz republic. He became famous posthumously after leading a rifle division into a self-sacrificial combat against German tanks in the battle of Moscow.

<sup>93</sup> The mass grave of the Central Committee members was found in the mountains outside Bishkek in 1991. The father of author Chingiz Aitmatov was one of the victims.

<sup>94</sup> Interestingly, Lipkin writes that Sayakbai ‘held a *komuz* in his hands’ during his recitals. This contradicts the present idea that the Manas is never accompanied by a *komuz* (see paragraph 2.1).

an unclean soul. It is bad for us, when we have an unclean soul. Manas punishes you when you have an unclean soul. Also when you are a Russian Manas singer, you must have God's law and the Prophets in your soul' (ibid.:103).

One year later, the war broke out. Lipkin was sent to the Baltic Sea and never gave the Manas a second thought. However, in 1946, the Russian Manas finally came out – a hardback edition with a red cover. Officially it sold well, but Lipkin claims that the Russian readers did not show any interest at all. Lipkin was awarded with an Honorary Token medal. After this, he wrote the novella *Manas the Great-hearted* (*Manas Velikodushiy*), based on the epic motifs. Free of the ties of translation, he wrote this book with great pleasure. In 1948 it came second in a competition for best children's book, and it was translated into a number of languages, among which was German.

Then in 1949, a new wave of purges surged across the Soviet Union. According to Lipkin, not only the Jews, but also oriental nationalists came under Stalin's suspicion. The Tatars were most in danger, and as Lipkin had just finished a translation of and an article on the Tatar epic *Idegei*<sup>95</sup>, he was called to the Central Committee. Here, he was questioned whether he was aware that he had worked on an epic in which the so-called patriots saw the Russian people as their enemy. Lipkin cleverly replied that the French communists are seen as French patriots, although France suppressed its colonies. He got away with it. However, a few days later, the magazine *Bolshevik* wrote that the *Idigei* epic was a feudal-nationalistic epic aimed against the people, and compared it to the wrongdoings of the present-day Tatar Party organisation.

The *Idegei* resolution frightened the circle of epic translators and scholars all over the Soviet Union. What had previously been ordered from above, was now suddenly under suspicion of being anti-Soviet and anti-Russian. The Azerbaijani epic *Kitabi Dede Kokurd*, the Uzbek epic *Alpamış*, the Kyrgyz epic *Manas* and all the other oriental epics came under scrutiny. Lipkin was in serious danger, as he had worked on *Idegei*, *Manas* and *Jangar*, the epic of the deported Kalmuk people. Soon there was talk of expelling him from the Writers' Union, which in those days meant a sure arrest. Lipkin suggested to a friend that he would show the Writers' Union a letter of assignment to translate the *Jangar* with a signature from Stalin himself. His friend shouted at him that, for the sake of his children, he should not be so foolish as to mention Stalin at all. Lipkin, however, found another clever way out of his awkward situation. At the meeting, Lipkin was attacked by an author

---

<sup>95</sup> Also transliterated to *Edigey* or *Yedigei*

he named 'N' in his article. When some other members of the Union argued in favour of keeping Lipkin in the Union because of his talent, Lipkin took out a piece of paper that he read out loud. The document was a letter signed by this 'N', who asked for two more seats at the jubilee festivities of the Kalmuk Jangar epic. Lipkin's friend burst out in laughter, saying: 'We are in the same shit!'

Lipkin asserts that when he fell into disgrace in 1980, it was decided that the *Manas* should be translated anew. Lipkin ends his article with the words:

I wish the translators good luck and tell them to remember the words that the great bard Sayakbai has said to me: "Do not forget that the *Manas* singer needs to have a pure soul. Is it bad for us to have an unclean soul. *Manas* will punish you when you have an unclean soul" (ibid.:109).

### 3.2.4 The crisis of the Turkic epics

Lipkin's tale of his *Manas* translation cuts across several periods in Soviet attitudes towards the Turkic epics. Starting with a sudden interest in epic publication and translation of epic texts after Gorky's speech of 1934, interest faded when accusations of nationalism cost many of the people involved their lives in the late 1930s. The second world war drew the attention away from the purges, and ethnic pride was even encouraged to create a sense of patriotism and involvement among the non-Russian population. This brought the *Manas* epic back to the publishing realm and made room for the publication of the *Manas* Series chapbooks. Soon after the war, the national epics came under scrutiny again. Accusations of bourgeois-nationalism and feudal-clericalism accumulated into a crisis in the 1950s.

Alexandre Bennigsen<sup>96</sup> wrote an excellent account of the 1950s crisis in 1975. He explains how the ambiguous status of the Turkic epics stemmed from tensions inherent in the attempts to adapt national cultures to prescribed socialist theorems and institutions (Bennigsen, 1975:463). Lenin solved these problems in theory by stating that, as paraphrased by Bennigsen:

'every culture of the past includes progressive, popular elements, which should be preserved in socialist culture as well as reactionary elements bearing the mark of the parasite classes which must be eliminated' (ibid.).

---

<sup>96</sup> A. Bennigsen was born in St. Petersburg in 1913 to Baltic parents. He moved to France with his parents in 1924, where he joined the military. In 1950, he studied at *l'École Pratique des Hautes Etudes* in Paris, where he specialised as an historian of Muslim movements in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union.

Expressions of a national character were constantly redefined as either ‘popular’ and hence progressive, or ‘bourgeois nationalist’ and therefore reactionary. Russian cultural elements were easily recognised as ‘popular’, even when they appeared in aristocratic and religious forms (ibid.). For other nationalities, however, this assumption was not as easily made. Although many Soviet Muslim intellectuals also regarded their cultural heritage as ‘popular’, Russian authorities did not always agree. Immediately after the second world war, the central government revised the policy of leniency that was aimed at keeping non-Russian inhabitants of the Soviet Union motivated for the war. They felt the need to check increasing centrifugal tendencies and put national expressions under stricter control (ibid.:464). In 1951-1952, this conflict over the question of the status of national heritage in the new socialist society resulted into what Bennigsen terms ‘the crisis of the Turkic epics’ (ibid.).

Bennigsen describes how this crisis was played out in a number of republics:

The campaign to purge the national cultures of those elements incompatible with the dominant Marxist-Leninist world view began in 1951. Initial attacks followed a standard pattern, beginning with derogatory comments in a local newspaper, *Pravda* or *Literaturnaia Gazeta*. The theme would then be picked up by the Central Committee of the respective republican Communist Party, next by various local, political, social, academic or literary organizations, and finally by the *oblast*, *raion* or city Party Committee, the Komsomol, the Academy of Science, state university, Union of Writers and so forth. The operation would culminate (...) with: 1) the universal condemnation of local intellectuals who were charged with idealizing the bourgeois-nationalist aspects of their national patrimony; and with: 2) a shower of approving telegrams and letters addressed to the Central Committees of the republican Party organizations, thanking their leaders for rescuing the Socialist Fatherland from the clutches of its most vile enemies (ibid.:465).

Whereas Lipkin claims that the persecution of the epics began with the Tatar epic *Yedigei* in 1948-1949, Bennigsen places the start in 1951, with the condemnation of the Azerbaidzhani epic *Dede Korkut*. The *Dede Korkut*, once known as one of ‘the most remarkable monuments of the Azerbaidzhani culture, glorifying the loyalty, heroism, the gallantry and love of the Fatherland’, became classified as ‘an obnoxious and anti-national poem’, ‘filled with the poison of nationalism’ (ibid.:466). A variant of the same poem among the Turkmen, *Korkut-Ata*, was also branded as ‘a poem of religious fanaticism and

of brutal hatred of non-Muslims' (ibid.). Next in line was the Özbek epic *Alpamış*, followed by the Kazakh *Koblandi Batır*, the Nogai *Er-Sain* and the Tatar *Shora Batır* epics.

Bennigsen explains that there was a varying degree of protest among the republican intellectuals, but none of these protests could stop the condemnation and purging of the epics and their advocates. Bennigsen sees the case of the *Manas* as an exception:

Unlike Muslim reaction in other republics which was generally weak or ineffective, Kirgiz response to the offensive against the *Manas* was bitter, passionate, outspoken and emanated from all strata of Kirgiz society (ibid.:468).

The attack started with an article by G. Nurov, a history professor at Frunze University published on Feb.2, 1952 in *Sovietskaya Kirgiziya*, a daily newspaper in Russian and *Kızıl Kyrgyzstan*, a daily in Kyrgyz. Both newspapers were published by the Central Committee of the Kirgiz Communist Party. In the article, Lipkin and Tarkovski's translation of the Great Campaign is discussed, and the *Manas* epic is accused of the same dangers as the other Turkic epics: it is feudal and imperialistic, full of Muslim fanaticism and racial and religious hatred of foreigners (ibid.:469). The article was followed by official condemnation by the central press and Soviet professional organizations.

A counter-attack ensued. Bennigsen claims that it was the Kyrgyz-language counterpart of *Sovietskaya Kirgiziya*, *Kızıl Kyrgyzstan*, that did the unthinkable by disagreeing. However, this comment is not supported by the material he presents in his article, nor by the bibliography of the *Manas* Encyclopaedia. Both sources suggest that the most important articles were published in both the Kyrgyz and Russian editions of the state newspaper. The first article that refuted Nurov's criticism was published on March 19 in both newspapers and was written by I. Sherstiuk, a Ukrainian professor of literature at the Pedagogical Institute of the SSR Kirgizia. Sherstiuk deferred to the authority of Engels, Belinskii, Lenin and Gorky and declared that the *Manas* is 'one of the most beautiful heroic songs in the world' whose 'Islamic character is no more shocking than the Christian character of the Russian *bylinas*, the *Slovo of Igor's Host* or the Georgian *Hero in the Leopard's Skin*, all of which remained part of the accepted canon' (ibid.). The next article appeared on March 28 in both papers and was written by Aali Tokombayev, 'a leading political and cultural figure in Central Asia, national poet of Kirgizia, member of the Central Committee of the Kirgiz Communist Party and deputy to the Supreme Soviet' (ibid.). He cited Marx, Engels, Lenin, Kalinin and even Stalin to prove that *Manas* is neither feudal nor pan-Islamic.

In April, two anti-Manas articles appeared, written by S. Doronian, an Armenian scholar who lived in Frunze, and M. Bogdanova, an ethnic Russian member of the Kirgiz Academy of Sciences. They admitted that the Islamic and feudal elements of the Manas were of recent origin, but as the enemy was Chinese, the epic is detrimental to Sino-Soviet friendship (ibid.). This argument was countered by I. Batmanov, who explained that the enemy was not Chinese but Kalmik – which was fortunate, because the Kalmik (or Kalmuk) had been a ‘punished nation’ who were deported during the second world war as punishment for their alleged help to the Germans. Other people spoke up for the Manas, among whom Manas scholar S. Musaev, who once again claimed that Manas is no more reactionary than the Russian *Slovo*, history professor J. Tashtemirov, who compared Manas’ struggle against invaders with the fight against the Germans; president of the Union of Kirgiz Soviet Writers K. Bayalinov, who declared that ‘Manas is a sublime and perfect monument’ and denied non-Kyrgyz the right to criticise a purely Kyrgyz work; professor B. Yunusaliev of the Kirgiz Academy of Sciences and the novelist Tügölbai Sïdikbekov who refused to condemn the Manas as anti-democratic ‘because it had been throughout the centuries the pride and glory of the Kyrgyz nation’ (ibid.:471).

The tried method of crushing epics at a public level did not work for the Manas. It was moved up to a higher forum, and from 6-10 June 1952, a conference was held to decide on the fate of the Manas. Three hundred delegates representing the Communist Party and the Academies of Sciences of the USSR, Kirgizia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan attended the conference. Samar Musaev, who was head of the Kyrgyz Literature Department of the Pedagogical Institute at the time of the conference, has written a fifteen-page article in the Manas Encyclopaedia under the entry ‘*Konferentsia*’ (MEI:305-320). In this article, Musaev gives a detailed description of the presentations and discussions at the conference, based on the stenographic records that are kept in the archives of the Academy of Sciences.

Musaev qualifies the conference as ‘a turning point in the printing and scholarship of Manas’ (ibid.:305). He explains that the conference was summoned to assess the nationalist character of the Manas epic. It consisted of four main presentations and a number of smaller lectures, followed by discussions and ending with a declaration endorsed by all. The lecturers gave their opinion on the question of the nationalist (*eldiüülük*) or popular (*eldik*)<sup>97</sup> nature of the Manas epic, and whether it was possible to

---

<sup>97</sup> The conference was held in Russian (except for the comments of İbirayım Abdırakhmanov), but the article by Musaev is written in Kyrgyz. I present the Kyrgyz terms used by Musaev.

create a 'clean' and 'truly popular' version out of the available versions. The first presentation by professor Borovkov dismissed the Manas epic as reactionary and full of feudal-clerical ideology. Borovkov claimed that it was impossible to rid the Manas of these elements. Still, he stated that serious and profound research of the texts at hand was important (ibid.:308). The second lecturer, Davletkeldiev, discerned many pan-Islamist, pan-Turkic, nationalist and subversive (*baskinchil*) elements in the existing versions. He was of opinion that these elements could be purged, and a clean and truly popular variant could be created (ibid.). The third lecturer, Bogranov, argued that many Manaschīs were bourgeois-nationalists and enemies of the People, but he supported the version of Manaschī Bagīsh Sazanov. In the days of illiteracy, the epic was used both by the people and the feudal lords, he said. But the versions that we have today cannot be given to the people. He considered it elementary to provide the people with a strong and truly popular version, similar to the Armenian epic 'David of Sasun' (ibid.:309).

The fourth speaker, Jakishev, agreed that the versions which were written down in the 1920s and 1930s are full of mistakes and contain many bourgeois-nationalist, pan-Islamic and pan-Turkic elements. But in his opinion, this cannot count for the entire epic, because then it would not have achieved such respect and prestige among the people. A work as great as the Manas epic cannot come into being without the participation and support of the people, he claimed. He therefore called for the 'cleaning up' of the versions in the archives, and purge them from elements that are alien to the people (ibid.:309-310). Thus the official line of the conference was set: the existing written versions of the Manas contained grave 'mistakes' and needed severe purging. The speakers and discussions that followed introduced critical notes to this idea. Some speakers, among whom was A. Klimovich, stressed the evils of the Manas even more strongly, but a number of scholars spoke up for the Manas and argued that it was a popular epic that contained precious values. A student representative, P. Baltin, argued: 'Are 'respect your parents', 'do not steal', 'do not lie' bad ideas?' (ibid.:317). Historian Bernshtam, who had been attacked by Klimovich for qualifying the Manas as popular, merely expressed his disapproval of censorship on historic versions of the epic. Professor Yunusaliev criticised the presentations of Borovkov and Klimovich and turned the gaze to the presentations of Jakishev and others who had stressed the valuable aspects of the Manas epic. He then presented his views on the origins of the Manas, asserting his authority by displaying profound knowledge on the subject. A pivotal point arrived when Mukhtar Auezov, a Kazakh scholar and novelist of great renown, spoke. He claimed that the Manas was now



proclaimed feudal on the basis of misunderstandings. He raised three questions: Do the Kyrgyz need Manas? Is it possible to create a combined version (*kurama variant*)? And if so, how should it be created? From the presentations at the conference he deduced that the Kyrgyz need the Manas. Secondly, he considered it possible to create a combined version: Radloff had also worked with three Manaschis to collect his Manas tales. And the third question should be left for the people to decide, Auezov argued (ibid.:317-318). The speakers who followed agreed that the Manas was basically a popular epic, but that it needed to be cleansed from a number of nationalist elements. The conference was concluded with a proclamation of ten points, subscribed by all. The most important conclusion drawn was that the Manas was a popular epic, although the existing versions had mistakes and were unsuitable for publication. A combined version was necessary, and was to be created by a number of philological institutes. Further, it was concluded that the combined version was to be printed in Kyrgyz and Russian (ibid.:319-320).

The outcome of the conference seems to have been concocted beforehand. Although speakers expressed different opinions on the nationalist or popular nature of the Manas epic, almost all of them agreed that a combined and purged version was necessary and advisable.

Bennigsen describes the events at the conference as follows:

The conference soon split into two camps: the anti-*Manas* faction composed mostly of Russians and some Kirgiz who held high positions in the Communist Party and the pro-*Manas* group which included influential representatives of the Kirgiz and Kazakh academic worlds (...). The conference ended in a deadlock, and it was decided that the question did not lend itself to an academic solution. This meant, of course, that the ground was being prepared for a political solution. (...) Before adjourning, the conference was read a resolution by the Central Committee of the Kirgiz Communist party concerning 'ideological work'. Without mentioning *Manas*, this supreme organ of the republic Party vehemently denounced the "bourgeois nationalists" who had managed to infiltrate the highest levels of Kirgiz cultural life – the state university, the Academy of Sciences and the Central Committee. Aaly Tokombaiev along with others was accused of "Pan-Turkic deviations," and soon was purged from the Central Committee and other positions of authority (ibid.:471-472).

His description of the outcome of the conference thus does not match Musaev's. As Bennigsen does not explicate which sources he used, it is hard to decide which one is more

accurate. Musaev's reference to the stenographic recordings makes his account most plausible. Yet another portrayal of the conference was given by Talantaali Bakchiev, the only person who ever mentioned the conference to me. During a walk in the streets of Bishkek one day, he told me about a major conference that changed the attitude of the Kyrgyz toward the Manas:

Before lunch time, there were only speakers who spoke against the Manas, saying it was a feudal epic. But after lunch, Mukhtar Auezov spoke, and he was a big authority in the Soviet Union. Auezov said that the Kyrgyz should safeguard their epic, it was their only wealth and they should not spoil it. This speech tipped the balance to the other side, and after that plans were made for a 1,100<sup>98</sup> anniversary celebration.

Talantaali thus stressed the importance of Auezov in the process of the preservation of the Manas. This idea, that seems to exaggerate the role of this icon, is echoed in an article by the Iranian linguist Iraj Bashiri of at the University of Minnesota, who writes that:

In fact, Mukhtar Auezov, a Kazakh, is a major contributor to the establishment of *Manas* as a mainstay of Turkic cultures in general. It is due to his untiring efforts and those of Chingiz Aitmatov that *Manas* continues to remain a part of Kyrgyz culture. During the Soviet era, Aitmatov contributed to the revival of the epic by outlining the reasons for revisiting this icon while Auezov provides the scholarship on which the arguments regarding the distance of *Manas* from religion and nationalism are established. Otherwise, like other epic traditions, *Manas*, too, would have been condemned and destroyed in a frenzy of anti-nationalist sentiments (Bashiri, 1999<sup>99</sup>).

Although Bennigsen's statement that the case of the Manas was different from the other Central Asian epics is compelling, it is not entirely convincing. Bennigsen himself mentions resistance in the other republics, especially in Turkmenistan. For the Kazakh, Nogai and Tatar epics, all he can tell us is that 'sufficient documentation for a detailed analysis of those campaigns is lacking', but 'one can assume that they followed essentially the same pattern outlined above' (Bennigsen, 1975:468). The main difference between the Manas crisis and that of other epics as it emerges from Bennigsen's description lies in the intensity and public nature of the protests, leading to a five-month struggle and the necessity of taking the decision to a higher political level by calling a special conference.

---

<sup>98</sup> The idea for the 1,100<sup>th</sup> anniversary was actually raised in 1945, to be held in 1947 (Prior, 2000:31).

<sup>99</sup> <http://www.iles.umn.edu/faculty/bashiri/Manas/manas.html>, last visited 01-04-2006

However, in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, resistance had also been strong and it took a considerably period of time to have the epic protagonists denounced or purged as well. Furthermore, Roberte Hamayon describes a process very similar to the case of Manas in an article about Buryat epics:

As for Geser, he had been made into an emblem of the Buryat national culture during and after World-War II as a reaction against the enforced Russification of the 1930s. In those years the hero and his epic were objects of acute debate, in 1948-1949 they were condemned as tools that glorified Mongolian nationalism and feudalism, in 1953 a conference was held for their rehabilitation (Hamayon, 2004:61).

Hamayon speaks of Mongolia, which may account for Bennigsen omission of the Geser epic in his study on the Turkic epics. Within the larger framework of the Soviet Union, however, the case of Manas may not have been entirely unique.

### 3.2.5 Combined version, 1958-1960

The 1952 conference paved the way for the creation of a so-called combined version (*kurama variant*) of the Manas epic. This version combined the recordings of various Manas narrations and turned them into a single, smooth storyline that was purged of all feudal-clerical elements that were ‘alien to the people’. In 1958, two volumes of Manas tales came out, in 1959 a volume of Semetei and in 1960 a volume of Seitek was published. In total, the combined version contained approx. 100,000 un-illustrated verse lines.

The storyline was based on the recorded versions which were stored in the archive of the Academy of Sciences of the SSR Kirgizia that had been well-stocked by folklore collectors in the previous decades. The combined version was largely based on the episodes recorded from seven famous Manaschīs. The compilers used this base material to create a polished story, without specifying what verses, or even tales, were taken from which Manaschī, or how discrepancies were eased out. In the Manas Encyclopaedia we read that the version was based on the versions of the seven famous Manaschīs ‘and others’ (*jana bashka*) (ME I:413), which makes it permanently impossible to figure out which part of the text was told by whom.

All three compilers were well-known Kyrgyz poets (*akındar*). Two of the compilers had been prominent pro-Manas spokesmen during the Manas controversy of 1952. Aali Tokombayev and Tügölbai Sıdıkbekov compiled the Semetei and Seitek volumes

respectively. The compiler of the two Manas volumes was Kubanïchbek Malikov, who had worked with Tokombayev in the 1930s writing the librettos for the operas Manas and Aichürök. The chief editor of the two Manas volumes, Manas scholar Bolot Yunusaliev, had also spoken out in favour of the Manas in newspapers and at the 1952 conference. Although these men were the figureheads of the combined version, references in the Manas Encyclopaedia make it clear that they were not the only ones who worked on this edition. Manas collector and Manaschï Ī. Abdırakhmanov was one of the people behind the scenes. In the books, he is not mentioned as an official editor or compiler of this book. In the Manas Encyclopaedia's entry on the combined version, Abdırakhmanov is only mentioned as one of the Manaschïs whose narrations were used. However, in the section on Abdırakhmanov himself we get a clearer picture of his actual role:

He also gave great help to the creators of the Manas trilogy combined version that was published in four volumes. A man who knew the versions of the Manas trilogy and all of their particularities very well, he took part in choosing the texts and commenting on them (ME II:354).

Arthur Hatto has a low opinion of this combined version, or the 'harmonized version' as he calls it. He deems it:

almost useless for scholarly purposes since one cannot tell where the version of one bard ends and another begins or where an educated poet-harmonizer has furnished links and embellishments (Hatto, 1981:303).

In his denouncement of the harmonized version of the Manas, Hatto forgets that in the Soviet Union of the 1950s, the purpose of scholarship was perceived quite differently. The main goal of linguists was not the search for purity and precision, but instead, the usefulness of their scholarly effort for the working classes was their number one priority. This led to a new type of epic experience, well worth studying in itself. Hatto, however, insists on the existence of an 'authentic epic tradition' (Hatto, 1990:XV), and seems convinced this is the only type that matters. In his mind, this authentic tradition is represented by the first written texts of Manas tales, the nineteenth-century texts recorded by Radloff and Valikhanov. The twentieth-century texts are all of lesser quality in his eyes, as:

the men of the twenties and thirties [failed] to restrain their bards from unmanageable inflation of themes (Hatto, 1980:303).

This idea is repeated in the introduction to his translation of Radloff's Manas, where he states that:

So far as authentic Kirghiz epic tradition is concerned, it is fortunate that leading Kirghiz scholars have begun to identify the innovative excesses of Sagymbai and others (Hatto, 1990:XV).

Hatto furthermore states that twentieth-century texts cannot be compared to Radloff and Valikhanov's texts unless:

due allowance ...[is] made for the distortions of Kirghiz nationalism, pan-Turkism, pan-Islamism and Communism, not to mention other tampering by intellectuals that needs to be exposed (ibid.:XVI).

Hatto's notion of an 'authentic epic tradition' seems to be based on the classical philological idea of the epic as a written text rather than an orally transmitted tale, as well as on the belief that the oldest written text available is the standard for authenticity. These starting points cause him to disregard much of the dynamics of oral epic performance, and to put the written words of a fixed text above human interaction. For Hatto, the text is sacred, as is clear from his hopes that among Manas scholars:

a clear notion (will) emerge[s] as to what constitutes a *text* in all its inviolability, indeed sanctity (ibid., italics in original).

In the nineteenth-century oral tradition of the Manas epic, however, it was the recital that was sacred, or rather: the connection between the Manaschï and the spirit of Manas. The tales were seen as the result from interaction between Manaschï and the spirits, and their contents were therefore fluid and various. The Soviet esteem for the written word had its bearings on the oral tradition, which led to a call for Manas books. The publication of the combined version emanated from the collision of these two traditions. That this version contained elements that were drawn from the *Zeitgeist* (communism, pan-Turkism etc) was in tune with the tradition, rather than tampering with it.

Still, censorship of the Manas versions was not applauded by everyone. At a conference of the American University in Kyrgyzstan, poet and linguistics professor Salijan Jigitov explained how censorship worked in those days:

Censorship is like a frozen river – underneath the layer of ice, the water still flows.

We have kept our literary traditions alive, and we can pass it on to our children. When the storms of Stalin's purges had subsided, it became possible to voice different visions on oral literature and scholarly standards for their publications.

### 3.2.6 The versions of Sagımbai and Sayakbai

By the 1970s, Manas scholars of the Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences began to work on ‘scholarly editions’ of the Manas. The Combined Version, with its untraceable but heavy influence of editors, was no longer satisfactory for scholarly purposes. Editions that provided the full text of the recordings of Sagımbai and Sayakbai’s recitals were prepared by teams of Manas scholars.

In 1978, the first part of a new edition of Sagımbai’s version was released. This version comprised of four volumes, published in 1978, 1980, 1981 and 1982 respectively. The first three volumes of this edition were easily available to me, as it was acquired by the university library of Leiden in the Netherlands<sup>100</sup>. The three volumes I had access to were published in Frunze by *Kyrgyzstan* publishing house, and were prepared by the Language and Literature Institute of the Kyrgyz SSR Academy of Sciences. This institute provided an editorial board of 13 people that remained stable for all three volumes. The chief editor was author and Academician Chıngız Aitmatov.

The books contain almost 1,000 pages of epic poetry, a small number of explanations in prose and 134 linocuts by Theodor Herzen (see paragraph 3.2.9). In the first volume, we find an introduction by Chıngız Aitmatov which places the Manas epic in a perspective that reveals the boundaries within which Soviet epic traditions were allowed to function in the 1970s.

Aitmatov is a master in setting an atmosphere and in his introduction to the Manas of Sagımbai, he manages to create a context for the Manas epic that convinces the reader of its importance in a changed world. Aitmatov stresses that life has changed enormously since Sagımbai’s version was recorded. In his words, this new era is a time of extreme growth in science, technology and social life. A new culture has formed where the old skill of words seems to have been ‘destroyed’ and classical rules have been changed. People have hopes for a bright future and look towards progress. However, the word craft that has sprung up from the genius of the people should nowadays, after a long and arduous journey, resume its rightful place (Aitmatov, 1978:7). Aitmatov describes the Manas epic as the great heritage of the Kyrgyz people, one of the most ancient peoples of Central Asia. However, he does not focus on tradition only, but adapts the epic to the present-day

---

<sup>100</sup> As I mentioned in the introduction, I found it difficult to gain access to publications in Kyrgyzstan itself. Libraries were frustrating labyrinths and bookshops did not possess any older copies than the English translation by Walter May.

context by using modern terminology. The following quote is originally made up of Kyrgyzified Russian words where Aitmatov states that the Manas discusses:

social life, lyrical love, moral and ethic issues, the geography of the ancient

Kyrgyz, medicine, astronomy and philosophical ideas<sup>101</sup> (ibid.:11, my translation).

Aitmatov certainly uses these Russified words deliberately, for Kyrgyz equivalents were available. Aitmatov was a master in avoiding Russian loan words in his novels. His novel 'The First Teacher', for instance, contains only 0.5% loan words, while a theatrical piece published in the same period counted 8.5%, and a physics text book 22% (Imart and Dor, 1982:186). Probably for the same reason of upgrading the Manas to contemporary standards, Aitmatov compares the Manas to Shakespeare's tragedies and the Bible.

Although these are not modern texts, they have entered the Kyrgyz context through contact with Russia and appeal to the idea of a modern world. According to Aitmatov, the Great October Revolution gave the Manas epic a second life, namely the immortality of life in a book (Aitmatov, 1978:9).

Although Aitmatov's introduction stays within politically acceptable bounds, he does mention a politically sensitive subject: the importance of Kyrgyz liberation wars in the epic. He states that:

... the main idea of the epic, the idea that circulates in its 'blood vessels' (...) is the idea of freedom and independence. (...) Between the idea of freedom and independence sung in the epic and our present-day understanding of freedom and independence there is a difference like heaven and earth. But the epic is precisely for this valuable, precisely for this dear, that the ideal, the philosophy of the freedom of people should not go lost (...) (ibid.:9).

At the end of volume one of Sagımbai's Manas version, we find an article by S. Musaev titled 'On Manaschı Sagımbai and his Version' (*Sagımbai Manaschı jana anın variantı jönündö*). This article describes how the present version came about. Musaev explains at length the practice of oral Manas performance in Sagımbai's days, and the process of writing down his version of the epic. Very little information is given about the present editing process.

By the time the second volume came out, it had become clear that the original goal of publishing Sagımbai's version in its totality was unattainable. In a short introduction to the second volume, the editorial board admits that although 'the version is given just as the

---

<sup>101</sup> In Kyrgyz: '... sotsialdik-turmush, cüyüü-lirikalık, moralıdik-etikalık maselelerin, bayırkı Kırğızdardın geografiyalık, meditsinalık, astronomiyalik, filosofiyalık tüşüniktörün ...'

Manaschī has told it' (Manas 1980:5), it proved to be impossible to give an exact rendering of the Manaschīs words as had been done in the first volume. For the second volume, some parts were shortened, and other long parts were given in prose<sup>102</sup>. In the original manuscript, Sagimbai told every episode from the beginning to the end, which resulted in many repetitions and references to other episodes. The editorial board explains:

In preparing over 18 thousand lines for publication in three (*sic*) volumes, it was impossible to print every episode in its totality' (ibid.).

The editors explain that this should not be seen as a breach with the tradition, however, as Manaschīs have always used prose introductions. It is impossible to tell the entire epic in one session, which made it necessary to give prose introductions and refer to other episodes during an oral performance. However, the board still deems it important to publish the entire version, and even all other versions:

To acquaint the people with every version of the Manas in its totality remains work for the future (ibid.:7).

An interesting aspect of the 1978 version of Sagimbai's Manas is that contrary to academic fashion at that time, all texts are written in Kyrgyz. No translations into Russian are provided, although the second and third book do have lists of Kyrgyz words that the editors assumed did require an explanation. However, these explanations too are given in Kyrgyz. A glossary of archaic Kyrgyz words is a recurring part of Manas publications. Although the language used in epic recital is very close to daily life Kyrgyz, the use of archaic words is part of the epic style. In part, this is because contemporary words cannot always cover the meaning, but using archaic words is also a means for Manaschīs to display their knowledge of the old, a knowledge highly appreciated by many Kyrgyz. Manaschīs, Manas scholars and elderly members of the audience spend long hours explaining the background of a long-forgotten word, and in doing so, they make a good impression on those who do not know. Interestingly, for the Kazakh Valikhanov, the language of the epic was easier to understand than the daily language of the Kyrgyz (Hatto, 1977:93).

The version of Sayakbai Karalaev in five volumes was published around the same time as Sagimbai's version. Two volumes on Manas were published in 1981 and 1986, two volumes on Semetei appeared in 1987 and 1989 and a single volume on Seitek came out in 1991.

---

<sup>102</sup> The Kyrgyz term for prose is *kara söz*, which literally means 'black word'.



In the first volume, Musaev has written an article called ‘Great Manaschī Sayakbai and his Recited Version’ (*Chong Manaschī Sayakbai jana al Aitkan Variant*) that will no doubt give insight into the process of gathering the epic text and preparing it for publication. Unfortunately, I did not have access to copies of this edition, and will therefore have to make do with secondary information.

Sayakbai’s version was published in Frunze. Again, Chīngīz Aitmatov was the chief editor and S. Musaev a member of the editorial board. The other editors are different from the Sagīmbai version and include names as R. Kīdirbaeva, A. Jainakova and M. Mukasov. The illustrations were drawn by T. Kurmanov (see paragraph 3.2.9) and are stylistically quite different from Herzen’s more famous linocuts.

The epic text is most likely based on a number of different recording sessions. From 1932 until 1937, Ī. Abdīrakhmanov and others wrote down Sayakbai’s tales on Manas. In later years, his tales on Semetei, Seitek and other epics were written down. In the 1960s, a number of audio recordings as well as a film of his work were made (ME II:186). From 1935 until 1954, Sayakbai worked at the *Philharmonia* and lived in Frunze, which made it easy for Manas scholars to collect his tales.

Manas scholar B. Yunusaliev wrote in 1967 that from no other Manaschī had the three parts of the Manas trilogy (Manas, Semetei, Seitek) been recorded in full. This gives Sayakbai’s version a specific importance for ‘his own people, and all of humankind’ (ibid.). In total, over half a million poetic lines on Manas<sup>103</sup> have been recorded from Sayakbai alone (ibid.). Out of these, around 200 thousand lines entered the 1980s five-volume publication. Some verses are shortened and overlaps are cut out, and more interestingly, as the Encyclopaedia states:

Certain parts that did not meet the ideas of the time of publication also did not enter the book (ME I:416).

Unfortunately, J. Sagīnov, the author of the entry, does not elaborate on which parts these were and how they did not meet the ideas of the time.

Sagīmbai and Sayakbai’s versions differ on a number of accounts. Generally it is said that Sagīmbai was more interested in religion, and that his version contains more religious elements. Sayakbai is characterised as a warrior who had served in the Red Army during the civil war following the Revolution. However, in an article written by K.A.

---

<sup>103</sup> The Manas Encyclopaedia does not make clear whether the number of half a million refers to all three parts of the Manas trilogy or to Manas alone.

Rakhmatullin<sup>104</sup>, it is not Sayakbai's but Sagımbai's version that comes out as the one with the most, and also most diverse battle scenes (Rakhmatullin, 1995:305). He also found that in Sayakbai's version, Manas often fights alone or with his forty knights. Sagımbai always portrays Manas as the head of numerous forces (ibid.). Whereas in Sayakbai's version only the Great Campaign describes a full-scale battle, in Sagımbai's version there are several dozens of such episodes.

Further differences that he found include the political motivation of Manas' campaigns. Sagımbai does not elaborate much on the harassments of the Chinese and Kalmık khans, but mentions them only briefly. Sayakbai however treats the expulsion of the Kyrgyz from their lands much more extensively (ibid.:306). In his version, the battles are depicted as defensive freedom fights. In Sagımbai's version, several episodes contain battles of a more aggressive nature (ibid.:308).

Another significant difference is the pilgrimage to Mecca which is mentioned by Sagımbai only. I have discussed this issue, as well as the attitude of contemporary Manaschıs, in chapter two, paragraph 2.4. But Rakhmatullin seems reluctant to elaborate on the topic of religion – he only notes that Sagımbai mentions Muslim religious rituals without describing them in detail (ibid.:327). Rakhmatullin also points at religion when he discusses the differences in the portrayal of Almambet. According to Rakhmatullin, Sagımbai explains that Almambet chose to join Manas exclusively for religious reasons, whereas Sayakbai adds political ones when he depicts Almambet's conflict with Chinese khans (ibid.:314). However, Rakhmatullin is careful not to put emphasis on the differences in religious orientation of the two versions, as this was highly controversial and dangerous in his days.

So far, no written version of the Manas has achieved the status of standardised version. As the oral performance tradition of the Manas epic is still alive, there is an infinite possibility to collect new versions and publish them. Even historical texts cannot serve as the standard, because, as Hatto puts it rather condescendingly:

the licensed collecting zeal of Kirghiz patriots and intellectuals in the twenties and thirties of this century proved self-frustrating and must long remain so, since it led to an accumulation of material so uncritical and so vast – four millions of lines are said to have been recorded – that even if teams of first-class scholars were there to

---

<sup>104</sup> Rakhmatullin passed away in 1946, more than two decades before the publication of Sagımbai and Sayakbai's versions. His findings were probably based on the archive manuscripts available at the time.

edit and analyse it, the task could not be accomplished in our time (Hatto, 1980:303).

### 3.2.7 Russian Translations

An important component of Manas publication in the Soviet Union was the translation to Russian, to make the epic accessible to all Soviet citizens. Lipkin's translation of the Great Campaign by Sagımbai was the first large-scale translation project. In 1984, two years after the last volume of the new Kyrgyz edition of Sagımbai's Manas version was published, its Russian translation came out. Lipkin claims that a new Russian translation was issued because his own translation needed replacement after he had fallen into disgrace. Of course, no word of that is found anywhere in the volumes of the Russian translation themselves.

The publication of the Russian translation fell into the series 'Epics of the Peoples of the USSR' that had begun in 1971 and had already issued Turkmen, Uzbek, Altai, Adıgh, Latvian, Bashkir, Yakut, Tajik, Komi, Khakas, Oseti and Kalmık epics. The new Manas edition was published in Moscow by Science Publishers (*Izdatelstvo Nauka*) and volumes came out in 1984, 1988, and 1990. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the series changed its name into 'Epics of the Peoples of Eurasia' and under this title, the fourth volume of the Manas translation was released in 1995. The editorial staff consisted of members of the Gorky Institute of World Literature of the USSR Academy of Sciences and the Institute of Language and Literature of the Kyrgyz SSR Academy of Sciences. I had access to the third volume, which was given to me by my Kyrgyz teacher and to the colophon of the fourth volume, sent to me by Daniel Prior. In this edition, each volume has a part one that consists of the epic text in Kyrgyz and a part two that contains a line-by-line Russian translation. Interestingly, the last page of the third volume contains a short summary in English of the contents of the three volumes and the scholars involved in their publication. Probably, the politics of *glasnost* brought an English-speaking audience in scope. Apart from the English summary, all introductory and explanatory texts are in Russian. Only the epic poetry itself is in Kyrgyz.

The only difference between the Kyrgyz text of the 1978 edition and the one in the Moscow edition is the lay-out. First of all, the linocuts by Theodor Herzen are absent in the Moscow edition. Secondly, the breaks between various titled episodes in the Frunze edition are left out in the Moscow edition. In the latter, the text continues with poetry as if there is

no break at all. I cannot tell how the Moscow edition has handled the prose parts of the Kyrgyz edition, because the third volumes do not contain any prose in either version.

In the introduction of volume three of the Moscow edition, we read that the majority of the epic text is from the version of Sagımbai Orozbekov. As the narrator fell ill, the end of the Great Campaign and the Death of Manas are taken from Sayakbai Karalaev. However, in the colophon of the fourth volume, we read that the epic text was taken from Sagımbai's version alone. The colophon is inaccurate on such an important detail, which reminds of the way Radloff and Valikhanov treated their bards: their names went unmentioned. Another interesting omission in the colophon is the name of Chıngız Aitmatov, who was the chief editor of the Kyrgyz edition which was the basis for the Russian translation.

In Soviet times, the Manas was also translated into other USSR languages. In 1962 and 1963, the four books of the combined version of the Manas came out in Kazakh. From 1964-1968, three books of the combined version were published in Uzbek. In 1982, a single-volume edition of Sagımbai's version of the Manas was published in Tajik and in 1989 a single-volume on Manas came out in Mongol. All these translations were published in the capitals of the republics to whose titular language the Manas was translated.

### 3.2.8 English translations

In the Soviet Union there was no impetus for providing an English translation of the Manas. This work was done by Arthur Hatto, a British scholar who worked conscientiously and passionately on translating the early, pre-Soviet Manas texts. Hatto worked as professor of German in the field of medieval poetry at the Queen Mary College of the University of London. In his spare time, he translated Valikhanov's recordings of K  k  t  y's Memorial Feast, which was published in 1975. Hatto retired in 1977, but continued to work on Manas translations. In 1990, Hatto's translation of the Manas tales recorded by Radloff came out. In both books, Hatto offered extended commentary on the historical and cultural context of the tales.

Before he became interested in the Manas, Hatto specialised in German epic poetry. He had translated Wolfram's *Tristan*, the *Nibelungenlied*, and Wolfram's *Parzival* for Penguin Classics. Hatto's background as a classical philologist shimmers through in his appraisal of the Manas texts, especially those of the twentieth century. For Hatto, the nineteenth-century texts count as the true tradition, which later texts tamper with. Hatto's

views placed him in a tense relationship with Kyrgyzstani Manas scholars, as we can see from this passage in the introduction to the Radloff poems:

*Manas* is rightly the proud possession of the Kirghiz people. Yet *Manas* is also the possession of those others in the wide world who respond to it. Among the latter, I for one – and there will be more like me in days to come – am not prepared to accept what the ‘owners’ say about it merely because they ‘own’ it. It is time that Kyrgyz scholars came to cherish *Manas* not only as patriots but also for the right aesthetic and scholarly reasons (Hatto, 1990:XVI).

Musaev had made clear what he thought of Hatto in an article written in 1979 and reprinted in 1995 in Russian, English and German:

There are, however, the attempts in the works of certain foreign scientists to distort the Soviet reality, to oppose one people to another and to use the epos for disseminating hostile bourgeois fabrications. For example, such attempts are made in the works of S. Bour, A. Inan and, partly, A. Chatto [sic] (Musaev, 1995:113).

Unlike Radloff, Hatto chose to write his translations in prose. This had the advantage that he could stay close to the original meaning of the words, not having to give in to demands of English poetry. Also, the prose reads more easily than written verse. Although the atmosphere of the oral performance is lost, this can be retrieved through the original Kyrgyz text on every left-side page.

### 3.2.9 Illustrations

With the rise of Manas publications, illustrations came to play a major role in forming the imagery of the Manas epic. In the early publications, illustrations were scanty. Three of the fourteen chapbooks that were published in the early 1940s as *Manas Seriaları* had an illustrated cover. Two portrayed an armed man on a horse, the third the mausoleum (*gümbözü*) of Manas. The 1958 publication of the Combined Version had a simple cover with only the words Manas, Semetei and Seitek on the respective volumes. There were no illustrations. The Frunze edition of Sagımbai’s version is the first that features a series of beautiful illustrations. The cover is still plain with merely a small stylistic profile of a man on a horse – the profile that later became the emblem for the Manas 1,000 festival. Inside, however, we find many black-and-white linocuts that powerfully depict events, people and atmospheres described in the text. These pictures were created by Theodor Herzen<sup>105</sup>.

---

<sup>105</sup> His name is also transcribed from Russian as Teodor Gerzen.

Herzen is an interesting figure whose non-Kyrgyz ethnic background puts him in a specific relation to the epic.

Herzen was born in 1935 in Orlovka, a village in Talas oblast<sup>106</sup>. His parents were ethnic Germans from the Ukraine and had moved there in the late 1920, when they fled from persecution and hunger (Herzen, 2000:5). After Theodor had finished school in 1951, he hoped to study art and was encouraged by his father, who was an art teacher (Prior, 1995:7). According to Daniel Prior, who worked closely with Herzen during the preparation of an anthology of his Manas illustrations that was published in 1995, it was Herzen's German ethnic background that made it difficult for him to pursue a career in art in the Kyrgyz SSR. He was refused entry to Frunze art school but was sent to Kizil-Kiya far in the South of Kyrgyzstan to study mountain agriculture instead (Herzen, 2000:7). Only after he finished this professional training in 1953, and due to crucial support from family and friends (Prior, 1995:7), he managed to get permission to study art in Frunze. Here, he studied for five years, but after this he failed to enter the Moscow High School of Arts, as he belonged to a 'punished nation' (Schulz<sup>107</sup>). He moved back to his home village and worked as a kolchoz painter for two years. In 1960, however, a journalist reported favourably about his work, which provided the necessary support to be allowed to study in Moscow after all. He was the only German of about 500 students (ibid.). Six years later, he graduated as 'Painter-Monumentalist' (Herzen, 2000:8).

In 1966, Herzen returned to Kyrgyzstan and worked for the art fund of the Kyrgyz SSR. Most of his assignments involved large mosaics and wall paintings in places all over the country. In 1970 he became a member of the Artist Union of the USSR and from that time on, he received several medals and honorary titles. The assignment that was to contribute most significantly to his fame was his illustrations for the Manas publications of 1978, 1980 and 1981. As his biographer Olga Popova says:

Theodor Herzen became famous in Kyrgyzstan for his illustrations of the Manas epic – a cycle of excellent linocuts, which are the result of years of work. (...) Herzen illustrated the version that goes back to S. Orozbekov – a version that became a classic after it appeared with Herzen's graphics. This is no miracle, as the epic was published for the first time in a visually appealing form, that was received well by critical Manas scholars, as well as ethnographers and fellow artists, and perhaps most importantly, the Kyrgyz people. Even more: Herzen became like a

---

<sup>106</sup> Now known as Ak-Döbö.

<sup>107</sup> [www.fietz-online.de/kirgistan/th.html](http://www.fietz-online.de/kirgistan/th.html), last visited 01-02-2008

fellow clan-member of S. Orozbekov, a special co-author of the famous *Manas*чи. (...) However, through these graphic cycles Herzen is not appreciated fully as an artist. These could never have been spontaneously created on such a high professional level if the author had not travelled a long creative road before that (Popova in Herzen, 2000:9-15, my translation from Russian).

In the first edition of the *Manas* he illustrated, not a word was spent on Herzen, his art or his background. This changed after Independence. Although it had hindered him in his early years, it was especially Herzen's non-Kyrgyz ethnic background that made him so interesting for politicians who wanted to stress the international and universal character of the *Manas* epic. In 1990, one year before the collapse of the Soviet Union, a cultural exchange organised by the German foreign ministry took Herzen to Germany<sup>108</sup>. He visited Worms, a town in the West of Germany that is known as the 'Nibelungenstadt'. After his visit, Herzen created a series of linocuts on the *Nibelungenlied*, in a style similar to his *Manas* illustrations. His work was warmly welcomed in Germany, and a number of major exhibitions were organised. Unlike many other Soviet Germans, Herzen did not want to emigrate to Germany. When asked if he planned to leave Kyrgyzstan, he replied: 'I would miss the country. It is one of the most beautiful countries in the world.' (Schulz) Herzen did not die in Kyrgyzstan, however: in June 2003, at the age of 68, he passed away after being bed-ridden with a long sickness in Hürth near Cologne.

There have been many other *Manas* illustrators, but none as famous as Herzen. Two other men were involved in illustrating the major *Manas* publications: B. Jumabaev and T. Kurmanov. Belek Jumabaev (1939-1977) illustrated two books of Sayakbai Karalaev's versions published in 1965 and 1969. He too used the technique of linocuts in a fashion very similar to that of Herzen. Jumabaev was a Kyrgyz from the Ысиккөл province, born in Jeti Ögüz village. The *Manas* Encyclopaedia, that uses his graphics to illustrate various entries as often as Herzen's, says that he was highly praised for his graphics of the famous horses of the epic, as well as his gallery of the main heroes. It states that:

Through the epic images he tried to open the national character (ME I:228).

Taalai Kurmanov (1949) illustrated the series of Sayakbai Karalaev's *Manas*, *Semetei* and *Seitek* of 1981-1991<sup>109</sup>. Kurmanov was born in a village in Chüy oblast. He began his

---

<sup>108</sup> Source:

[http://www.worms.de/deutsch/rathaus/stadtnachrichten/nachrichten/archiv\\_2003/141\\_nibelungen\\_kunst\\_030703.php?navid=26?navtext=Stadtnachrichten](http://www.worms.de/deutsch/rathaus/stadtnachrichten/nachrichten/archiv_2003/141_nibelungen_kunst_030703.php?navid=26?navtext=Stadtnachrichten)

<sup>109</sup> In the entry on Kurmanov in the *Manas* Encyclopaedia, we read that he illustrated '*the Manas in four volumes: Manas book 1 – 2, Semetei 1 – 2 (1984-1989)*' (MEI, p355). This contradicts other information

studies in Frunze and went to Leningrad to study at the art college in 1976. His style is quite different from Herzen and Jumabaev's linocuts. Whereas these linocuts are powerful in their sobriety, Kurmanov's graphics are much busier and more colourful.

### 3.2.10 Scholarly debates

One of the most profound influences of the Soviet period on the Manas was the introduction of a 'scholarly view' on the epic. After the literacy offensive, the next step in the development of the 'backward' Kyrgyz people was the establishment of a corpus of universities and research centres (Amsler, 2007:38). These academics were schooled to view the world in a different light than before, a light that held prestige and power. They began to question the idea that Manas was a historical person, as well as the idea that his Spirit chose and instructed the narrators of his tale. Spiritual elements in the Manas tales and in Manas narration were considered non-scientific and explained away as fantasy and psychological phenomena (see chapter two paragraph 2.2.1). The written gained importance over the oral, both as authoritative source for knowledge production and as forms of disseminating the tales. Scholars who worked with written texts gained prestige over learned persons who produced orally transmitted knowledge. The introduction of the scholarly view on the Manas, in combination with the prestige awarded to the scholars, transformed the ways people regarded the epic. Next to the image of the Manas as an oral epic sustained by the spiritual world arose an image of the Manas as a book assessed by intellectuals.

However, the intellectuals were not free in their assessment of the books. The Russian folklorist and Manas scholar Viktor Zhirmunski can serve as an example of how Soviet Manas scholars had to navigate a safe passage through the political tides in their scholarly work. Zhirmunsky became known within Western academic circles in the 1960s. The Manas Encyclopaedia states that he was a correspondent member of the Academy of Sciences of Berlin, Britain, Denmark and Bavaria (ME I:220). His work best-known in the West is *Epic Songs and Singers in Central Asia*, which was published as part two of the book *Oral Epic of Central Asia*. Nora Chadwick wrote the first part under the name *The Epic Poetry of the Turkic Peoples of Central Asia*. The book came out two years before Zhirmunski's death in 1971.

---

from the Encyclopaedia, which tells us it was a five-volume edition, published between 1981-1991, and that the Seitek volume was also illustrated by Kurmanov.



Zhirmunski started his career as a philologist in 1912, when he finished his studies in German linguistics at the university of Saint Petersburg (ibid.:219). He held his first position at the University of Saratov, a city on the Volga, and then moved back to Petersburg, that had been renamed 'Leningrad'. He published works on Russian and West-European literature and became interested in Turkic folklore. He was evacuated to Tashkent in 1941 to escape the German siege of Leningrad, where he became the head of the folklore department of the Uzbek Academy of Sciences. Here, he was acquainted more profoundly with the Turkic epics (ibid.:220), especially the Uzbek epic Alpamış and the Kyrgyz epic Manas. Zhirmunski wrote a short monograph called Introduction to Manas Research (*Vvedeniye v izucheniye Manasa*) and participated in the authors' collective that wrote The Kyrgyz Heroic Epic Manas (*Kirgizskii Geroiskii Epos "Manas"*) in 1961 (ibid.). In October 1944, he moved back to Leningrad.

During his career, Zhirmunski faced a number of corrective interventions by the Communist Party on his scholarly work. In the 1920s, Zhirmunski had worked in the formalist tradition of Vladimir Propp and others, who studied the structure, style, verse and language of folklore, with disregard for ideology and historical conditions (Oinas, 1973:45). In the aftermath of Gorky's speech of 1934 that had placed folklore in the political spotlight, the folklorists were urged to change their course. The methods of formalism, as well as the Finnish school that studied history of a tale by comparing all available versions on geographical and historical aspects, were declared harmful (Oinas, 1973:48). At a meeting of the folklore department of the Leningrad Academy of Sciences in April 1936, Propp publicly admitted "the failure of the attempts of the formalists to get out of the blind alley, into which the formal method of the fairy-tale study had led them." (ibid.) Zhirmunski subjected his formalistic works to self-criticism, as well as his former 'short-sighted' attitude towards the sociology of Hans Naumann (ibid.). After this correction, folklorists turned their attention to folklore as the creation of the working people, disregarding evidence that many songs were created and nurtured by singers in aristocratic circles (ibid.:49).

After the war, a new wave of political interference came over the Russian folklorists. Andrei Zhdanov had developed a doctrine that dominated culture and science from 1946 until its official rejection in 1952. The Zhdanov doctrine divided the world into two camps: the imperialistic camp headed by the United States on the one hand and the democratic camp headed by the Soviet Union on the other. The works of Soviet artists and scholars were judged on possible bourgeois and cosmopolitan characteristics, and anyone

who failed to comply to the doctrine risked persecution. The theories of Alexander Veselovsky, an eminent Russian linguist of the nineteenth century who had enjoyed great esteem in the Soviet Union, were denounced, and Propp, Zhirmunski and others found themselves on the wrong track once again. At an inquisitional meeting that was held at Leningrad University, Propp and Zhirmunski had to admit their mistakes anew. In Oinas' words:

Zhirmunsky admitted that his position in the discussion on Veselovsky had been wrong from the political point of view and therefore also from the scholarly one. "The party's directives," he said, "open the only right path for correcting our mistakes" (ibid.:54).

In response to the Party's fierce denunciation of the idea of borrowing, which implied that Soviet tales could have been contaminated with foreign influences, Zhirmunski developed the historical-typological theory. This theory held that similarities in epic plots of the feudal period among different nationalities were the result of similar conditions in their social development, and not of borrowing (ibid.:57). Zhirmunski advanced this idea in 1958, when the Zhdanov doctrine was long abandoned. Although the de-Stalinisation process brought more freedom for scholars, they remained very much restricted in their choice of methods (ibid.:58). It was probably his ability to adjust to the political tides that gave Zhirmunski the chance to develop ties with European linguistic institutes.

The works of Kyrgyz Manas scholars followed a similar pattern of negotiating dual loyalties to science and the Communist Party. Sarah Amsler has studied these processes among social scientists in the Kyrgyz SSR and independent Kyrgyzstan in detail. The topic of the Manas epic would form an excellent case study, but falls beyond the scope of the present work.

### **3.3 Publications of the Manas After the Soviet Union**

The sudden collapse of the Soviet Union had profound impact on the realm of Manas publication. Manas scholars in Kyrgyzstan received salaries that could not cover the exponentially increased costs of living, and were sometimes not paid at all. This forced scholars to take on other jobs, such as street vending, and severely decreased the motivation to work at the Academy. Funding for Manas publications slowly emerged from other sources, such as UNESCO, European, American and Kyrgyzstani NGOs, Turkish government and private organisations and private Kyrgyz businessmen. Most of this funding was given in the framework of the 1995 Manas 1,000 celebration.

### 3.3.1 Scholarly Editions

In 1995, Sagımbai and Sayakbai's versions of the *Manas* were published in 'scholarly editions'. By now, the editions of the 1970s and 1980s were no longer good enough. They were regarded incomplete as they had been so heavily edited. This time, the full original text was to be published. Before the government ceased funding the project, four volumes of Sayakbai's version and six volumes of Sagımbai's version had been published. These were not for sale in bookstores during my fieldwork period, and unfortunately, I have very little information on these editions.

### 3.3.2 English translations

Another major publication for the *Manas* festival was the English translation of Sagımbai's version. This was no longer a matter of the Academy of Sciences and the established *Manas* scholars, but new organisations and new names appeared in the colophon. Again the places of publication were Bishkek<sup>110</sup> and Moscow, but this time, copyrights belonged to 'Kirghiz Branch of International Centre 'Traditional Cultures and Environments'', a UNESCO-related organisation, and the publishing house of the American Institute of Physics (AIP). AIP invested heavily in contacts with the former Soviet Union in the first years after the break-up and has facilitated many publications, mostly in physics.

Furthermore, the colophon states:

Published to order of the National commission of the Kirghiz Republic for UNESCO, the State General Direction "Manas-1000" and the Business Project "MURAS" (Manas 1995f:2).

The translation was made by the Scottish poet and translator Walter May, who used the three volumes of the Russian translation that had been published by then as a source. The general editor is Rustan Rakhmanaliev, a new name on the *Manas* scene. The other editors are also new names, and interestingly they are listed by country of origin: there is one from the USA, one from Russia and one from 'Kirghizia'. The American and Russian editors, Andrew Wiget and Aleksandr Vashchenko, are academics with a background in Native-American literature. The Kyrgyz editor Natalia Musina is an active promoter of artisans in the NGO-world, and the wife of chief editor Rakhmanaliev, both ethnic Uzbeks. The only

---

<sup>110</sup> Bishkek is the post-Soviet name for Frunze.

ethnic Kyrgyz in the list of editors is Tologon Kozubekov, who is said to have ‘presented this edition’ together with Rakhmanaliev.

The English edition consists of two books that translate three of the books of the Moscow edition, here indicated as three ‘parts’. The first book contains an introduction by the translator Walter May, and an English translation of the poetry of the first and the majority of the second volume of the Moscow edition. Apart from the small prose introduction to volume one, no prose is translated and the English version contains only poetry. The translation is as close to the Russian original as possible, but May also made sure the English version rhymes and has a rhythm suitable for recital. Here, May’s translation differs significantly from Hatto’s, but it resembles Radloff’s method of translating oral poetry. After 7,999 lines of part two, the book abruptly stops in the middle of a verse. The second book then starts without any introduction and jumps straight back into the poem. It contains the second half of part two and part three in total, followed by a commentary per part and an alphabetical vocabulary. The latter two sections explain situations, customs and expressions to a reader with limited knowledge of the Kyrgyz social context. It is not clear who has composed the commentary and vocabulary. In his introduction, Walter May merely tells us that they have been composed by ‘Kirgizian and other experts’ (Manas 1995f:4).

What stands out is that the narrator of this version, Sagımbai Orozbekov, is only named in the colophon. There is no mention of him in the introduction or in the commentary. In his introduction, May explains that the epic was created by generations of bards. He also tells us that Manaschis recite the epic. As he goes on to compare the Manas to the fixed texts of the *Odyssey* and the *Mahabharata*, the reader might easily think that at present, Manaschis recite a fixed Manas text – the one translated in this book. May does not clarify that there are many different versions and that every oral performance is an improvisation session.

The English edition issued 2,000 copies of each volume. When I arrived in Bishkek in 1996, there were still a number of copies available in the bookstore. At the time of my second stay in 1999, it was sold out.

Unsatisfied with this translation, Elmira Köçümulkızı, a Kyrgyz scholar at the University of Central Asia with a Ph.D. from the University of Washington, began her own translating efforts. She translated the first eight episodes of the scholarly edition of

Sayakbai's *Manas*, a total of 8640 verses and published them on the internet in 2005<sup>111</sup>.

Köçümkülkizi criticises the other two English translations of the *Manas* by Hatto and May:

Even though Hatto used the original Kyrgyz text for his translation, he misunderstood many words, customs, and socio-cultural issues mentioned in the epic. He did not speak Kyrgyz, nor had he lived among the Kyrgyz, and therefore was not able to give the flavour of the original language and provide the socio-cultural context. (...) Mayor [sic], too, did not know Kyrgyz, and therefore used the Russian translation of the epic. In other words, his translation of *Manas* is a translation of the "beautified" Russian translation. This factor alone undermines the authenticity of his translation. There is no need for further discussions of his translation of *Manas*, for any translated text done from a secondary source is only of secondary value (Köçümkülkizi, 2005).

Köçümkülkizi recognises that her own translation lacks the skill of English native speakers who are professional translators. She sees her strength in her background as a native Kyrgyz scholar who has a deep understanding of the original text (ibid.). As her audience is 'a general English speaking audience, not (to) a scholarly community', Köçümkülkizi has left the abundant repetitions of Sayakbai, that she recognises as characteristic for oral poetry, behind.

The translation by Köçümkülkizi is a literal translation of the verse lines and therefore appears to be in verse. These are not poetic verses, however, for Köçümkülkizi feels that her writing skills in English do not suffice to produce lines with seven to eight syllables, alliteration and rhyme. She hopes to work with an English poet to turn her scholarly translation into a version suitable for publication (personal communication, Oct.16, 2007).

### 3.3.3 Theodor Herzen's illustrations

Another prestigious publication within the scope of the 'Manas 1,000' festival was the coffee-table anthology of Theodor Herzen's *Manas* linocuts. This book, as well as May's English translation, was purchased mostly by ex-patriots in Kyrgyzstan, due to its price. It is titled *Manas – the Epic Vision of Theodor Herzen* and is edited by Daniel Prior. All texts are in English. The book was published in Istanbul in Turkey and was funded by the Eridan Finance and Industry Corporation. This was Kyrgyzstan's largest free enterprise

---

<sup>111</sup> <http://www.silkroadfoundation.org/folklore/manas/manasintro.html>, last visited March 1, 2008.

until its bankruptcy in 2001, and headed by parliamentary Daniar Üsenov. The team responsible for publishing, lay-out and production was made up of three people with Russian names.

The book presents 109 of the 132 illustrations that Herzen has made. These are accompanied by small excerpts of the *Manas* by Sagımbai Orozbekov. In certain cases, however:

wider searching of the Kirghiz oral epic tradition yielded fitting poetic passages from other bards and other times. These have been woven into the presentation without comment (Prior, 1995:11).

Prior recommends Hatto's translations to English readers, and leaves the translation by May, that came out the same year, unmentioned.

#### 3.3.4 Mambet Chokmorov

At the Literature and Art Institute of the Academy of Sciences, a Kyrgyz edition of parts of Mambet Chokmorov's version was published in 1995. Funding came from Zamir Mukashev, the chairman of the *Ai-Köl* agricultural firm of Tong rayon, the area where Mambet Chokmorov lived and died. This publication came in the form of a chapbook and consisted of 1,000 copies. It was based on recordings between 1965 and 1972, the year before Mambet's death (Akmataliev 1996:7). Seven well-known *Manas* scholars recorded almost 400,000 lines of *Manas*, Semetei and Seitek on audiotape and transcribed them to paper. None of this was ever published, but kept in the archives of the Academy of Sciences. A number of the written manuscripts got lost over time as they went from one institute to the other, and the quality of the audiotapes deteriorated so that they became difficult to decipher (*ibid.*).

The 1995 edition contains approximately ten thousand lines of poetry. The tale starts at the episode of the Great Campaign (here called: 'the Campaign to Beejin') and ends with the tale of the construction of *Manas'* mausoleum. The poetry is preceded by an extended summary in prose of other episodes from the *Manas*, especially on the events before *Manas'* birth. One of the compilers of the book, *Manas* scholar Bolotbek Sadıkov, has written the 22 page introduction on the specifics of Mambet's version. All texts are solely in Kyrgyz. I was given this book by the other compiler, Esenalı Abdildayev, during the 'Mambet 100' festival in 1996.

### 3.3.5 Festival Material

The 'Manas 1,000' festival itself yielded two specific publications: the presentable Program and the proceedings of the International Scientific Symposium 'Manas Epic and the World's Epic Heritage'.

The twenty-two-page Programme of the festival was published in three languages: there was a booklet in Kyrgyz, one in Russian and one in English. I bought a copy of all three in a bookstore in 1997. The Programme was produced by the 'National Organizing Committee for the Preparation and Celebration for the 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the epos Manas', the 'State Directorate Manas-1000' and the 'Scientific-promotion Business Project *Muras*'. Professor A.A. Asankanov and lecturer T.N. Ömürbekov were the editors. The Programme begins with the reproduction of the official decree by president Akayev and the resolution of UNESCO on the Manas 1,000 festival. These are followed by an introduction to the epic. This tells of the length of the epic, the history of its study and recording and the value of the epic as a source of historic and ethnographic data. A chapter on the role of Manaschi is occupied largely by an enumeration of Manas scholars. The final chapter describes some basic facts about Kyrgyzstan, 'the motherland of Manas'. The last three pages provide the actual timetable of the six days of the Manas 1,000 festival. The text is complimented by many colour photographs of Manaschi, Manas scholars, Manas books, Kyrgyzstan landscapes and a few of Herzen's linocuts. The conference proceedings have been published in the typical Manas cover: a red booklet with the Manas 1,000 logo of a horseman's silhouette. The text is made up by short abstracts of 66 presentations, grouped in six categories:

The Manas Epos as a Historical-Ethnographic Source

The Reflection of Ethno-Cultural Links in the Epic Works of Central Asia

The Problems of Language and Poetics in the World's Different Epic Heritages

The Problem of Studying the Manas Epos Texts and Variants

The Kyrgyz People's Socio-Political Thought According to the Manas Epos

The Manas Epos and Arts

As the abstracts are very short, they provide only a basic glance into the debates at hand.

From the colophon it appears that there was a Russian edition of the proceedings as well, but I only found the English one in the bookstore. The book was produced by the 'Kyrgyz Republic National Academy of Sciences', the 'Manas Epos Millennial Anniversary State Board of Directors' and the 'Scientific Promotion Coordinative Business *Muras* Project'. Asankanov and Ömürbekov, who also edited the festival programme, are

among the list of compilers, together with T. Askarov, A. Abetekov and N. Bekmukhamedova. The editorial board consists of 13 scholars, among whom are ‘compilers’ and well-known Manas scholars such as Musaev and Kïdïrbaeva, and the historian Ploshkikh.

### 3.3.6 Schoolbooks

Another 1995 Manas publication was the schoolbook *Aiköl Manas* (Noble Manas). This is a colourfully illustrated, well-printed paperback of 183 pages of prose for children. It tells the most important episodes of the Manas epic in chronological order. The book was written by Kadïrbai Mambetakunov, a poet and play-write who has also translated the Kalevala into Kyrgyz. The illustrations are by A. Akmatov. Funding came from UNICEF and the Meerim foundation of president Akayev’s wife Mairam. The book starts with a short introduction by D. Andashev, member of the International Aitmatov Club, and is titled ‘A Rich Heritage for Children’. Andashev explains the importance of the Manas epic by focusing on its written forms. ‘There are many versions of the Manas epic, and there are few people who have read all versions’, Andashev writes (Mambetakunov, 1995:3). The oral tradition of the Manas is left unspoken.

The tale itself is printed in an accessible lay-out, but the language is not easy. There is no indication for which age group this book ought to be used. Interestingly, the Ministry of Education is absent in the colophon. I have not seen this book being used in any of the classes I attended, most teachers complained of a lack of good books and worked without textbooks. The edition was issued in 15,000 copies, however, which makes it likely that some schools did get a hold of the book.

### 3.3.7 Private editions

Another way of getting publications funded since independence has been through a payment by the author him- or herself. An example of this is Almambet’s Tale (*Almambettin Jomogu*) by Talantaalï Bakchiev. He gathered the required amount of money from his own income and social network to have his version of Almambet’s Tale published in 1995. This was done in a 120-pages chapbook edition of 1,000 copies. Talantaalï proudly presented me a copy at our first meeting. The booklet contains around 4,500 lines of poetry, an introduction in Kyrgyz by two teachers of the Ìssikköl International University and a glossary of 42 words. The introduction elaborates on Talantaalï’s ‘genetic and social connection’ to Sayakbai Karalaev, on the process of dreams and visions that led



to his Manaschihood, his studies at the Bishkek *Philharmonia*, and his present efforts to develop himself as a Manaschi. It also analyses Talantaali's version of Almambet's tale, a part of the Great Campaign episode, and compares it to other versions of this tale. I never found the booklet in a bookstore, not in Bishkek, nor in Karakol.

Kaba Atabekov, for whom it is also very important to have a published version of the Manas on his name, keeps his hopes focused on the Academy of Sciences. He has been working on writing down his own version in bright blue cahiers on which he has drawn the Manas emblem for a few years. Long rows of verse, written in beautiful handwriting without any corrections, tell the story of Manas. Although he had already written four of these notebooks that contain around 10,000 lines each and was half-way through a fifth one during my stay in 1996, Kaba said he was only at the beginning of the tale. He told me he would write the epics of Manas, Semetei, Seitek and Er-Sari (Seitek's son), and then he would die. He had already handed a part of the manuscript over to *Muras* publishers in Bishkek, and hoped they would publish it when it was finished. Kaba realised that the collapse of the Soviet infrastructure might thwart his ambitions, for he jokingly said to me: 'Can't you give money!' (*Akcha ber!*).

### **3.4 Manas books and their audience**

Since the 1940s, a lot of time, effort and money has been spent on creating Manas publications. These books have found their ways to different libraries and homes in Kyrgyzstan, the Soviet Union at large and the rest of the world. Their existence has changed the perception of the epic in a number of ways; they have created fixed textual versions of the tale, thereby relocating the authority on knowledge of the epic from Manaschis to a piece of paper, they have transformed the Manas from oral tradition into literature, and have created links between the Manas tale and epic tales from all over the world. The existence of Manas books gave the epic extra cachet to my host family in Kazibek. They stressed the importance of books during various conversations with me. In an all-family tea session, for instance, everyone commented on the importance of the Manas epic by pointing at the necessity to read the books. I asked them if reading the Manas from a book was the most important way of getting to know the Manas. The eldest son of the family replied:

Before (*ilgeri*) there were people who did not read it but listened to it. They were illiterate, they could not read but only listen. Just like children up to 6 years old. But now everyone can read. And it is better to read than to hear the Manas.

I asked him why, and everyone reacted. The whole family agreed that reading the books was much better. There was general consensus that books contained the truth, because they are well-researched, and if you read a book, you can study the details. When I commented that seeing a performance is so interesting, the eldest son replied that if you see a performance for the first time, it is interesting. But after that, it is better to read the books, especially of talented Manaschīs.

In an interview with a son-in-law of the family, a teacher at the village school, the stress was also on Manas books. He told me:

There are more than 40 versions of the Manas. We, the common people, know only 5 or 6 of them. The Manas was not written down until 1920, before that it was only narrated. The 40 versions are from that time, the older versions have become lost. Abdirakhmanov wrote a lot of these versions down. He went to Manaschīs and wrote down what they narrated. Without him we could not have read these versions.

However, during my three-month stay, I did not see any of my host family members actually take out a Manas book and read it – either for themselves or for me. In the two years I spent in Kyrgyzstan, I never saw anyone reading the Manas tale in any published form. The tale was not read by individuals to pass the time, and apart from the eldest son of my host family, no-one ever claimed that they did. Manas books were not used in classes in schools or at universities either. I asked Talantaali about it in 2007 over e-mail. He had just begun to teach Manasology (*Manas taanuu*) at the Technical University in 2007. He replied that he never makes his students read Manas texts:

I do not make them read books. I tell them in short about the topic. Then I use that text to speak about world problems. For instance, I talk about father-son relations, the fatherland, name giving, symbolism, problems between men and women.

The Manaschīs I met did not study the written versions either. Talantaali told me that he never reads the book, because he has his own version. He feels that listening to the Manas is more powerful than reading it. He therefore does listen to LP records of Sayakbai, but never reads his books. I saw Kaba Atabekov a number of times writing down his own version, and he eagerly studied the Manas Encyclopaedia I brought him. But not once did I see him read a Manas tale.

Back in the Netherlands, I met an immigrant Russian lady. She knew the Manas epic, because she had worked at a department for Eastern Literature on a Moscow university. She told me she had seen the books, but confided she had never read them.

Speaking for myself, I started to read the English translations by Hatto and May a number of times, but never enjoyed the exercise. Listening to a Manaschi's performance, however, never tired me, even if I could not follow the story line.

It is possible that the chapbooks of the 1930s and 1940s were popular among the 'workers and peasants' for whom they were published. The Manas books that tell the tale in prose may also have been more popular. Unfortunately, I have no data on the popularity of these Manas texts. I did not witness anyone reading an old chapbook or a prose tale of Manas. When I asked Talantaali if he had ever read Lipkin's *Manas the Greathearted*, his reply made me wonder if he had ever heard of the book. It seems likely that Lipkin's position of a dissident made the book hard to find in Kyrgyzstan. The perishable nature of the chapbooks probably accounts for their absence in my field research.

### 3.5 Other Manas-Inspired Art Forms

The Manas epic also inspired artists who use other art forms than recital or writing. In pre-Soviet days, artistic expression among the Kyrgyz consisted of song, non-vocal music, carpet making, yurt decorating, poetry and story telling. Dance, theatre, painting and sculpturing are said to have been absent<sup>112</sup>. With the era of socialism, many new art forms entered the Kyrgyz scene. The Manas was a source of inspiration for artists engaging in these new forms, not only for its rich artistic potential, but also as a means to indigenise foreign art forms.

In 1939, two years after the bloody purge of 'bourgeois nationalist' Kyrgyz cadres, a grand opera based on the Manas was performed in the Kyrgyz State Music Theatre. This opera was called *Aichürök*, after Manas' daughter-in-law. The story line was based on the Semetei epic and all lyrics were in Kyrgyz. The music style was that of European opera, although several Kyrgyz folksongs were interwoven. A number of *küü* (instrumental songs) and *koshok* (lamenting songs) served as the basis for arias and librettos. Over the years, the opera was performed many times. In May 1999, I went to see a performance of the opera in the Bishkek Opera House. The performance was far from sold out, in contrast to some of the Russian and French operas and ballets I had seen. The opera was visited by

---

<sup>112</sup> Semyon Lipkin's description of his presentation of the Manas translation to the Kyrgyz intelligentsia makes clear that the matter of whether there was dance or not before the Soviet Union was already debated in the 1930s (see paragraph 3.2.3). In 1996, the director of the Club of Kazıbek village, Asanakun Bazarbayev, told me that the Kyrgyz had a form of dance that was danced by shamans alone. Shamans 'danced the seasons' by imitating the growing of plants and the songs of birds. Other people played national games instead of dancing, Asanakun said. The Kyrgyz 'national dance' that is part of the contemporary folklore repertoire was created by musicians in Soviet times, he told me. The most striking features of this dance are the elegant hand movements and the traditional dress of the dancers.

a handful of Kyrgyz and a few Chinese tourists. Folklorisation surrounded the imagery of the Kyrgyz, which may have been new at the time the opera was composed, but had become boring by the late 1990s.

A second opera based on the Manas theme was called *Manas*. This opera tells the tale of K  k  t  y's memorial feast. It was first performed in 1946, and a second version of the opera had its premiere in 1966 (ME I:412). The opera *Manas*, described as a 'patriotic heroic opera' in the Manas Encyclopaedia, did not use Kyrgyz melodies but only 'world classical opera musical forms: arias, duets, trios, quintets and sextets' (ibid.). It has been performed in Leningrad and Moscow, and this is where Lipkin met Sayakbai (see paragraph 3.2.3). The opera was also performed occasionally in the 1990s, but unfortunately I was never in town when it was programmed.

Manas was also a recurring theme in plays, movies and novels. Interesting to note here is Talantaali Bakchiev's observation that a significant number of playwrights, movie directors and novelists died during or shortly after they worked with the Manas theme. Talantaali pointed out to me that Joomart B  k  nbayev, who wrote a play called *Semetei*, died in a car accident when he was working on a movie about the Manas epic in 1944 (ME I:158). The accident happened when B  k  nbayev was in   ss  kk  l to find a location for a film about *Semetei*. On his way back from Karakol (then: Przvalski) the car slipped at Chong Kara-Oi, a place near Cholpon-Ata. The other two passengers were unharmed, but B  k  nbayev was killed. In 1996, the movie director Melis Ubukeev died half a year after he had finished a popular scientific film called *The Universe of Manas (Manas Aalam  )*. Furthermore, the novelist Asim Jakipbekov, who wrote a novel called *Tengiri Manas* (Manas, Son of God<sup>113</sup>), died four days after the publication of his book in 1994.

The Manas was also presented to the public in the form of a huge 'architectural-sculptural composition' that was placed on the square in front of the *Philharmonia* in Frunze in 1981. This composition consists of a bronze statue of Manas on a horse, towering high over the city, flanked by smaller bronze statues of Khanikei and Bakai, and the red granite busts of four famous Manasch  s: Sayakbai, Sagimbai, Bal  k and Tin  bek. Through these other art forms, a multitude of forms and images have become part of what Henk Maier has termed 'floating memories' of the epic. The 'indistinct cloud of more or less fragmentary memories that have been floating around' (Maier, 2004:114) has been

---

<sup>113</sup> The word Tengir refers to the Godly sky. The word Kudai is the usual word for God, occasionally Allah (or Allakh-ata) is used. Tengir is an explicit reference to the old, shamanistic belief system that connects the Kyrgyz to the peoples from Altai.

built up not only by Manas performance and Manas publications, but was extended by the imagery derived from operas, plays, movies, paintings and sculptures.

An entirely different occurrence of dissemination of the Manas epic to other realms was witnessed by Mathijs Pelkmans during his study on converted Christian Kyrgyz. In an article that discusses the evangelical attempt to disconnect religion and culture by introducing Kyrgyz cultural symbols into a church commonly associated with Russian or American culture, he describes the performance of an Isachī, a ‘Jesus teller’:

At the end of a service at the Church in Bishkek, Pastor Tamaz announced the performance of an *Isachi*. The term *Isachi*, he explained, was derived from *Manaschi*, or narrator of the famous Kyrgyz Manas epic. The *Isachi* in question, a woman wearing a pink and black ‘national Kyrgyz dress’, was seated on a felt carpet on the podium. She closed her eyes for a moment, she lifted her hands with palms up, and started reciting. Her sitting posture and arm movements, as well as the rhythm and intonation of her voice, strongly resembled performances by *manaschis*. The story she told, however, was that of the life of *Isa* (Jesus). Several people I spoke to after the service, including two Kyrgyz-speaking American missionaries, were full of praise for this remarkable performance. One of them commented that this was such a perfect example of the way the ‘good news’ can be contextualized, presenting it in a form that was recognizable to Kyrgyz people. When I met Pastor Tamaz again, he mentioned that another five *Isachi* were in training and would soon be able to perform all over Kyrgyzstan (Pelkmans, 2007:893).

### 3.5.1 Chīngīz Aitmatov

Kyrgyzstan’s most famous author, Chīngīz Aitmatov, also found inspiration in the Manas epic. His case shows many interesting features and deserves a more lengthy treatment. In his monograph on Aitmatov and his work *Parables from the Past, the Prose Fiction of Chingiz Aitmatov*, J.P. Mozur begins his description of Aitmatov’s background with an extensive reference to the Manas epic. After explaining that the name of the mountain ridge near Aitmatov’s place of birth shares its name with the epic hero Manas, Mozur reiterates the clichés surrounding the epic:

Manas is the receptacle of the Kirghiz national heritage, a virtual ethnographic and cultural treasure chest. (...) Through the centuries, the *manaschi* inspired and encouraged the Kirghiz nation in its darkest hours. (...) As a youth, Aitmatov heard

performances by Saiakbai Karalaev (1894-1971), one of the “last great *manaschi*,” and has expressed his deep regret that the ancient art has been lost forever (Mozur, 1995:11,12).

Mozur draws parallels with Aitmatov’s work and that of the epic and its narrators:

Aitmatov pursued a similar social mission in his creative work, seeking to remind a denationalized Kirghiz intelligentsia of the dignity of their national heritage. (...) His prose possesses a distinct oral quality, with numerous refrains and subplot digressions punctuating the narration. (...) The depiction of negative characters in Aitmatov also appears to be a *Manas* legacy. (...) As in the recitations of the epic singers of *Manas*, an air of improvisation seems to pervade Aitmatov’s work, with style and composition clearly subjugated to the compelling moral message that the author wants to convey to his readers (ibid.:12-13,168).

In his general typology of Aitmatov as a writer, Mozur strongly emphasises his connection to oral literature, and the *Manas* in particular. Although he sees Aitmatov first and foremost as a respected liberal writer who, as a good party member, found the opportunity to criticise the Soviet system without being cast out, his ‘respect for the national heritages of the world’s many peoples’ (ibid.:167) is in Mozur’s view the second defining feature of Aitmatov’s work. In fact, these two traits of Aitmatov’s work are closely interlinked:

Aitmatov’s folklore parables portray his heroes as rooted in cultures that are timeless and imbued with wisdom and beauty. While such parables give the author a useful screen for dealing with the censors and are thus part of a greater strategy designed to ensure that his fiction would become accessible to the broad Soviet readership, they are particularly representative of Aitmatov’s own thinking and worldview (ibid.).

The origin of this image most likely comes from Aitmatov himself. Mozur conducted a number of interviews with Aitmatov in 1991, in which he stressed the importance of the *Manas* epic for the Kyrgyz and for his own work. Secondly, in one of his novellas, Aitmatov explicitly refers to images from the *Manas* epic. In September 1975, the story *Early Cranes* (*Rannie Zhuravli*) was published in Russian in the Moscow literary periodical *Novii Mir* (New World). *Early Cranes* is set in a village in Talas during the second world war. As all the able-bodied men are away at the front and hunger plagues the village, five young boys are taken from school to take over the necessary task of ploughing the mountain fields. The boys spend months preparing themselves and their horses for the task. When they have only just begun their work in the fields, however, their horses are stolen

by thieves. The story ends dramatically with the image of the main character Sultanmurat facing the attack of a wolf as he sits by the body of his beloved horse that was shot by the thieves.

Mozur's analysis of *Early Cranes* rests on a parallel with the *Manas* epic. However, he clearly overemphasises the importance of the *Manas*<sup>114</sup>. First of all, the references to *Manas* are not as many-fold as Mozur implies and they certainly do not dominate the story. In a number of passages, the tale's characters are likened to epic characters. When they are inspected by the kolchoz chairperson, the young boys are excited as if *Manas* was standing in front of them and as if they were his knights (Aitmatov, 1980:56-58, German translation). All five of them are described as warriors with specific qualities, in ways that resemble enumerations in *Manas* recital in content, but not in style. Aitmatov also draws attention to the discrepancy between this imagery and reality. After all, they are boys with 'narrow shoulders and heads on thin necks' (ibid.). A second reference to *Manas* comes in the form of a remark from the kolchoz chairperson, who tells the boys not to be startled at the bad condition of the horses: 'Did you expect that the swift-footed race horses of *Manas* were waiting for you?' (ibid.:50). The last connection with the *Manas* epic is made when Sultanmurat asks his younger brother to send a note to the girl he loves. His brother is excited and asks: 'You love her, don't you? You are like Aichürök and Semetei, aren't you?' (ibid.:95).

Interesting as these references to the *Manas* are, Mozur makes more of them than what seems justified. Mozur's assertion that Sultanmurat's lines are 'peppered with lines from the *Manas*' (Mozur, 1995:83) is exaggerated, to say the least, and therefore Mozur's claim that this makes the novella 'unconvincing and wooden' does not hold stake. Also Mozur's positive evaluation of the use of the *Manas* epic is beside the point. Mozur's interpretation that there is a worldview underlying the novel which views the values of the epic of the preceding generation as the source of human inspiration and courage in times of crisis may fit well the idea that 'eternal continuity is an important component of the Central Asian heritage' (ibid.:82), but it is based on an Orientalist vision and is not supported by the novel or by Kyrgyz actual experience of life in Soviet times.

Mozur then has fallen, along with many other outside observers, into the trap of focussing everything there is to say about Kyrgyzstan on oral literature and the *Manas* epic in particular. The February 2002 issue of *National Geographic Magazine* provides an

---

<sup>114</sup> I am indebted to Jan de Wolf for his discussion of this aspect (personal communication).

interesting example of this tendency. In an article named ‘Central Asia Unveiled’, Kyrgyzstan is presented as “the Stan with the oral epic”. The opening sentence of the article states:

No Kyrgyz festival is complete until a singer rises to intone stanzas from the longest narrative in world literature (Edwards, 2002:116).

If this is true, I have witnessed many incomplete festivals during my fieldwork. In similar ways, many tourist guides, travel websites and other sources that give brief introductions to the country make use of the exotic quality of the Manas and portray it to dominate the entire culture.

However, although Mozur certainly over-estimates the role of the Manas in Aitmatov’s work, it cannot be denied that Aitmatov does have a strong affinity with the Manas epic. His contribution to the publications of Sagımbai and Sayakbai’s versions in the 1970s and 1980s shows in the form of highly appreciative introductions. According to Daniel Prior, it was Aitmatov who was responsible for the revival of the Manas jubilee idea (Prior 1996:20). In three consecutive Communist Party congresses between 1978 and 1986, Aitmatov carefully interwove Kyrgyz nationalist and Soviet rhetoric, attempting to revive the origin date of Manas at 840 AD and calling for a grand celebration of the 1,000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the epic (ibid.).

Whereas Mozur uses commonplaces to describe Aitmatov’s attachment to the Manas, Aitmatov himself finds words that convincingly express a deep-felt respect for the epic. In an article called *My Teacher (On Auezov)*, he explains:

When one travels abroad, one carries the picture of one’s house and family – usually a photograph or another keepsake –, but for the people of the country or area he visits, he brings a picture of his people, the picture of his nation, their history and culture.

In this way I too own national relics that accompany me in foreign lands, with which I cross the thresholds of other people: the Manas and Mukhtar Auezov (Aitmatov, 1978:367, my translation from German).





## Chapter four The Use of the Manas Epic in Politics

Epics telling tales of a hero who defends and unites his people have high potential as political tools. They can bring political messages to life, touching upon the listeners' imagination rather than their opinions. Epic tales refer to an imagined past, a pristine state that one may long to return to. The hero embodies an ideal that no existing leader can ever equal, keeping alive the hope that one day, another hero like him will arise. Above all of this, the telling of and listening to a tale creates a mood and gives these ideal images an emotional charge. Politicians can thus be attracted to heroic images, seeing them as fertile soil for their political statements.

Two sets of questions arise when one looks at the political use of a specific epic. The first is in regard to how the epic is used as a political tool. Who picks up this tool, and in which way is it employed? Is the epic a tool of propaganda for the powers that be, or is it a tale of rebellion? The second set of questions concerns the contents of the epic: how are the political units defined in the epic? Who are the 'us' and 'them' in the tales, and how do these relate to contemporary divisions of 'us' and 'them'?

### 4.1 Politics and the Manas before the Soviet Union

#### 4.1.1 A Tool for Whom?

In the nineteenth century, Manas-tellers were present at the courts of various clans. R. Kïdirbaeva tells us that the early nineteenth-century Manaschi Balïk<sup>115</sup> had relations with several political figures. In her description of his career, political leaders plan a central role. She tells that once, Balïk told the Manas for the *kushbek* (governor) of the town Namangen, a vassal town of the Bucharâ khanate (ME I:137). Balïk told the Manas with such devotion that the *kushbek* awarded him with precious gifts. He also wrote a letter to the leaders of Talas (Balïk's birth region) telling them to treat Balïk with respect. Later, Balïk was invited by Baitik, the famous *manap* of the Solto tribe, to move to Chüy. Balïk only accepted the second invitation. When he was 75, the *manap* died. Balïk moved away

---

<sup>115</sup> Balïk was the nickname of Bekmurat Kumar Uulu (see chapter 2, paragraph 2.1).

to Kochkor. Three years later he returned to Chüy and when he died two years later, he was buried close to Baitik (ibid.).

Daniel Prior mentions two other bards from that period who lived in courtly circles. The first is Nazar Bolot Uulu, who is most likely the singer of the Memorial Feast for Kökötöi Khan recorded by Valikhanov. Prior writes:

He spent some time in the company of the manap Chünibay, and his authorship of *KO*<sup>116</sup> places him in the direct orbit of the Bugu manap Borombay and the sub-chief Toksaba. The courtly style of *KO* points at a bard accustomed to making a living in a chief's inner circle (Prior, 2002:73).

Prior also mentions Choodon (1835-1900) from the Southern Kyrgyz. Legend has it that he was the Manas-bard of Khudayar, the Khan of Kokand (ibid.). Prior finds such interest of the Kokand Khan in Kyrgyz poetry hard to believe, and assumes Chodon was rather a fixture in the local entourage of some Kyrgyz or Kipchak resident *kushbek*. Prior does think it is possible that Kyrgyz bards in the South found an appreciative audience at an Uzbek court, as the southern dialect resembled Uzbek more than the northern dialect (ibid.).

The above tells us next to nothing about the working relationship between Manas narrators and the *manaps* and *kushbeks*. All we know is that Manas tales were told to and appreciated by certain chiefs, but that does not inform us about the setting of such performances. Did the Manas teller perform for the chief himself or was he asked to entertain the chief's guests? Did he receive a regular salary in some form or did his income depend on the mood of the chief after a performance? Did he work only for the chief, or was he free to narrate wherever he wished? Further and most interestingly: did the chief influence the Manas performance, or was he influenced by the tales? Did he employ the Manas tales for political purposes, such as propaganda or intimidation?

In the works of Radloff we find certain clues about the interaction between Manas recital and political leaders. There are three interesting passages that shed light on the influence of a prominent person's presence on a narrator's performance. The first is a description in his travel journal *Aus Siberien* of a performance of a Kara-Kirgis (today known as Kyrgyz) narrator that accompanied Radloff to a Kirgis (today known as Kazakh) commemoration feast:

---

<sup>116</sup> Hatto and Prior use the abbreviation *KO* to refer to Valikhanov's recording of the Memorial Feast for Kökötöi Khan.

Late in the evening a few prominent guests arrived [to our yurt] to pay me a visit. At an invitation, the famous singer of the Kara-Kirgiz who had come here with me praised the esteemed guests in a well-phrased song of praise that delighted the audience, who all master the Kara-Kirgiz language, so much, that the Sultan Adam Kul happily took his robe of his shoulders and threw it at the singer as a gift (Radloff, 1893:488).

This quote is a reminder that in the nineteenth century, narrators did not specialise in the Manas exclusively. We cannot be sure from Radloff's writings that this man did indeed also narrate Manas tales, but it seems possible that he was one of the narrators that Radloff worked with for his recording sessions that included several Manas poems.

The quote also suggests freedom of the narrator to tell tales whenever he wants to. Even if this famous singer was affiliated to a chief elsewhere, there was no reason for him not to bestow praise on other leaders. When confronted with an audience of powerful people, the narrator tuned in to their wishes and was rewarded with a gift of high material and symbolical value (see chapter 2, paragraph 2.5).

A second reference by Radloff of the influence of political figures in the contents of the tales is found in the preface to the *Proben*, when he explains the occurrence of the *Ak Padisha*, the White Tsar, in the tales<sup>117</sup>. Radloff sees this as an attempt of the narrator to please him:

In the case of this episode I would like to note that during his entire performance, the singer portrays Manas as a friend of the White Czar (Russian emperor) and the Russian people. The Czar operates as an active character everywhere in the course of the narration. This insertion of the Czar is caused only by my presence; the singer believed that the Russian functionary might begrudge that Manas also conquered the Russians, and provided a pleasant change for me (Radloff, 1885:XIV, my translation from German).

Radloff thus holds that the Manas teller, very well aware of the political connotations of his recital, felt free to alter the tale's political setting to fit the situation. Unfortunately, Radloff did not explain how he came to the conclusion that the White Tsar was inserted for his pleasure. It may have been his personal conclusion that he omitted to verify. Assuming this, his idea has been questioned by N. Chadwick. She holds that the narrator had other

---

<sup>117</sup> From the memoirs of Count Pahlen, nineteenth-century inspecting senator of the Tsar, it is clear that Ak Padisha was the common name for the Czar throughout Turkestan (Pierce 1964).

reasons for bringing the Russian Tsar into play, reasons that may have had nothing to do with Radloff's presence. She explains that:

Radlov suspected that the emphasis laid on Manas' loyalty to Russia was intended as a compliment to himself. It is, however, to be doubted if the motif was actually invented for this purpose, for it is easy to see that Russian Turkestan and the fierce hill nomads had everything to gain by mutual aid against the powerful Uigur confederacy, backed now by Chinese, now by Tibetan support (Chadwick, 1969:33)<sup>118</sup>.

For Radloff, however, the idea of a direct influence of the audience on a narration became an important theoretic pillar (see chapter two, paragraph 2.6).

Two themes are central in the political use of Kyrgyz epic tales: ethnicity and class. The tales could be adapted to the situation and the audience of the moment because they were orally performed. In the 1950s, when written versions of the epic could not be bent as easily, it was exactly the themes of ethnicity and class that made the Manas suspicious in the eyes of the Communist Party. President Akayev quotes a report of the KGB expert commission in his book on the Manas:

'For the sake of their class interests bourgeois nationalists forced some storytellers of Manas to distort the epos, mixing it with anti-national, Pan-Islamic, and Pan-Turkic ideas and in certain instances with open counterrevolutionary attacks against the Soviet authorities, the Bolshevik party, and its leader V. I. Lenin. This was the case in the version by Sagımbai Orozbekov' (KGB report in Akayev, 2003:274).

By the time of Kyrgyzstan's independence, ethnicity was the main reason why Manas was taken up as a mainstream political symbol. Class was left out of the official picture. Manas was a proud Kyrgyz, but not specifically rich or poor.

In older versions, however, Manas does not seem to be Kyrgyz. Ethnicity in general, as well as specific groups and their interrelationships, were quite different in the nineteenth-century versions. In the next section, I will address the ethno-political map that was sketched in the versions that were recorded by Radloff and Valikhanov.

---

<sup>118</sup> It should be noted that there is no evidence that in this period the Uyghurs were still an important threat to the Kyrgyz. In East China, Yakub Beg, an ethnic Tajik born in what is now Uzbekistan, ruled a Muslim state with mostly Uyghur troops. Yakub Beg is said to have granted the Kyrgyz much freedom and his leadership was willingly supported by the Kyrgyz. Kyrgyz resistance concentrated on Kokhand, and there was internecine fighting. An Uyghur threat was probably ancient history by the time of Radloff's visit.

#### 4.1.2 Ethnicity in the Manas tales of Radloff and Valikhanov

This section will be an investigation of ethnicity in the Manas texts of the nineteenth century. Who is ‘us’ and who is ‘them’? Who is the enemy and who are friends? Is ethnicity, religion or locality the defining factor? How does this relate to political divisions at the time of the recital?

Many students of Central Asian societies have argued that before the Soviet Union, ethnicity was no factor of importance in politics and people’s perceptions of the social world. Religion and clan loyalty were far more determining, they hold (Smith, 1990:215, 230, 262, Tishkov, 1997:115, Akiner, 1995:29).

Arthur Hatto also believes that in the Manas versions recorded by Radloff and Valikhanov, Kyrgyz nationalism was absent. However, he does perceive the epics in ethnic terms and merely substitutes the Kyrgyz for Nogoy (or Nogoi or Nogay). In the Commentary of his translation of Valikhanov’s Kōkötōy-Khan, he writes:

The traditional heroes of Kirgiz epic were Nogay, whose status as heroes par excellence resembled that of the Achæans in Homer. Specifically, ‘Kirgiz’ heroes in Kirgiz epic are the product of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century nationalism (Hatto, 1977:90).

In this article, Hatto makes it overtly clear how he feels about the later developments:

That Kirghiz are so prominent by name in twentieth-century versions of *Manas* is entirely due to patriotic, even nationalistic tampering with the tradition (ibid.).

Hatto gives an apt description of the Nogoi ethnic group, but he may have made the mistake to take the word Nogoi as having one singular meaning. As we have seen (chapter one, paragraph 1.1.2), Turkic names cross-cut ethnic groups, clans and individuals. If Manas was said to be Nogoi, this does not necessarily mean the narrator meant to portray him as a member of this particular ethnic group that we know through Tatar and Russian history. For a number of my informants the word Nogoi referred to Manas’ grandfather, whose name was Nogoi.

The following is a detailed study of how the recorded nineteenth century versions of the Manas dealt with ethnicity in general. Was ethnicity the determining factor in who was ‘us’ and who was ‘them’, or was it rather religion and clan affinities that Smith, Akiner and Tishkov claim to be essential for nineteenth-century social mapping? If ethnicity was mentioned, was Manas Kyrgyz or Nogoy, or even something else?

In the first poem recorded by Radloff, the Birth of Manas, a small poem of 164 verse lines, Manas is not assigned to a specific ethnic group. His father Jakip is introduced as the son of Kara-khan, son of Bögön-khan, and the head of Jeti-tör (Hatto, 1990:6,7). It seems likely that for the audience of those days, this information sufficed to place Manas on the ethnic map. Quite likely, Jakip and Manas were not Kyrgyz, nor Nogoy in this poem. If they were Kyrgyz, Jakip's complaint of not having a son who would shatter the Noygut, the Kokanders, the Sarts, the Kazakh and the Kyrgyz 'who never stop to be greedy, who keep begging and drinking and are never full' (ibid.) would not make sense. If they were Nogoy, it seems strange that among the envoys who depart from Manas' birth feast saying 'Manas will be our ruin', there are Yarkend, Kitai and Nogoy ambassadors (ibid.:8,9). Manas identifies with the Muslims when he declares to open up the path of the Muslims, scatter the wealth of the Infidel and impel the Muslims to victory (ibid.).

In the next poem, concerned with Almambet leaving his father and joining the Muslims, Manas is said to be a Yellow Nogoi (*Sari Nogoi*) (ibid.:14,15). Almambet is the son of Kara-khan. This Kara-khan is probably another one than the father of Jakip in the previous poem and is described as Khan of the Oirot 'of the four regions'. Other ethnic groups that are mentioned are the Kitai and Orus (ibid.:22,23), that are nowadays the names for the Chinese and the Russians. However, the word Kitai is also used synonymous with the Kara-Kitai or Khidan, a Mongol group that ruled present-day Kyrgyzstan in the twelfth century (see chapter one). We also find mention of the Naiman, a group that Barthold has described to suppress the Muslim population of present-day Kyrgyzstan in the thirteenth century. In this poem they are always referred to as a 'teeming and innumerable nation' (ibid.:42,43).

The second part of this tale tells how Almambet comes to Manas. In this poem, there is another mention of the Kyrgyz. Manas summons his forty knights, among them his 'special ones': Kolmombet from the Kazakh and Jalmanbet from the Kyrgyz (ibid.:50,51). Manas addresses them as his '*elim-minän jurtum*', which Hatto translates as 'my people and nation'. In present-day Kyrgyz, however, the word for nation is *ulut*, which has a different meaning from the words *el* and *jurt*. The first means people in a more general sense, the second refers to kin rather than ethnicity. Of course, these are subtle differences that cannot be transposed problem-free from one language to another, especially not over a time span of a century. The point I wish to make here is that when Manas refers to his knights as his 'nation', the narrator probably did not mean to portray an ethnically homogenous nation. Rather, what he describes is a federation of people united under Manas' leadership. In this poem, Manas is described as a Khan and a *Bek* by one of his knights, in response to Almambet's demand to speak only to Khans and

*Beks* (ibid.:64,65). When the two meet, Almambet introduces himself as Oirot, but Manas' ethnicity is not mentioned (ibid.). They become brothers (*bir tuugan adam*) when they both drink milk from Manas' mother's breast (ibid.:70,71). The Kitai and Orus in this poem are people from Urum and the Krim respectively, which makes it equally plausible they were Turkic Kitai and Tatar as Chinese and Russian (ibid.:54,55). The third poem that Radloff recorded also falls into two parts: the first deals with the duel between Manas and Kōkchō, the second with the marriage, death and return to life of Manas. Here, we find the curious mention of Manas' voluntary subjection to the *Ak Padisha*, a term that was used throughout Central Asia to denote the Russian Tsar (Pierce, 1964:17). This poem starts with explaining that Manas has become famous, that he travelled far and terrified everyone. It then tells us that Manas went to a feast organised by the Ak Padisha where he submitted himself to the Padisha, had a sash-of-honour bound around his waist and accepted the food offered by the Padisha. Hatto explains that these are submission rituals that recur in a funeral lament for the nineteenth-century Saribagish<sup>119</sup> chieftain Jantai, who had submitted to Kokand (Hatto, 1990:73). A few verse lines later, however, the narrator claims that the Ak Padisha was equal to Manas (ibid.:76,77). Manas left the Orus in peace, and all peoples other than the Orus entered Manas' counsel. Here, Manas is said to have gone to the Ak Padisha to honour him (*silading*). This portrays a relationship of peaceful co-existence rather than submission. Another while later, however, Manas tells himself that if he is under the protection of the Ak Padisha, no-one will quarrel with him (ibid.:78,79). In a strange twist of the story, the Ak Padisha now becomes a supernatural figure. Manas is wounded and is said to travel on a far journey, where he is with God (*Kudai*) and the White Padisha. Hatto offers no explanation for this story line, and I also did not receive a reply from Talantaali when I asked him about it.

In this tale, Manas' enemies are the Kitai, Sart, Kalcha and Kizil-bash<sup>120</sup> (ibid.:76,77). However, the main theme of this poem is not ethnic struggle, but the fight between Manas and Kōkchō, Almambet's former lord by whom he was maltreated – though neither this nor any other reason is given for Manas' wish to seize Kōkchō's herds, horses and harnesses. Neither Manas nor Kōkchō are identified by ethnic affiliation. The only reference to their status comes from Kōkchō, who points out that they are both illustrious and only sons (ibid.:82,83).

In the second part of the poem, the Ak Padisha returns as a lord higher than Manas. Manas goes to the Ak Padisha to tell him he will keep to what the Padisha says, and hopes he will not be angry when he destroys his enemies the Kizil-bash, Kitai, Sart,

<sup>119</sup> Saribagish is a Kyrgyz clan (*uruu*).

<sup>120</sup> Kizil-bash literally means Red-head. Radloff translated this ethnonym to Persians (Radloff 1885:64).



Tajik and some individual warriors. The Padīsha answers Manas that he can do whatever he wishes, as long as he does not hurt the Padīsha's people (ibid.:92,93). Further on, Manas asks permission from the Padīsha to marry Khanīkey (ibid.:110,111). In this poem, the Padīsha is named a number of times, and always as the man who protects Manas, as long as Manas does not hurt the Orus (ibid.:104,105). The poem ends with general remarks about how Manas prospered after having submitted to the Ak Padīsha (ibid.:156,157).

The other occasion where ethnicity is important in this tale is when Manas' father Jakīp, who is on his way to Temir-Khan to ask for the hand of his daughter Khanīkey for Manas, meets Mengdi-bai, a subject of Temir-khan. Jakīp tells Mengdi-bai he has tried to find a wife for his son Manas among the Kitai, Sart, Kalmak, Kalcha, Kizil-bash, Kyrgyz and the Tajik (ibid.:100,101) but found none. Of the Kyrgyz he says that he found no beauty among them, and it is interesting that they are named in an enumeration of enemies. However, when Manas orders his knights to gather horses as a bride-wealth for Khanīkey, they drive up Kyrgyz horses (ibid.:110,111). These are described by Mengdi-bai as Jakīp's tribute laid on the people (ibid.:112,113), which suggests that Jakīp and Manas' people are indeed Kyrgyz in this version. Temir-khan's people are Tajik, as we learn from a casual remark (ibid.:122,123). Hatto thinks that the narrator forgot that Jakīp had already ranged among the Tajiks and found no suitable wife, and although this seems inconceivable in the contemporary context (Khanīkey's being Tajik is well known by everyone, in fact, it is so obvious that Talantaalī can assert his position as a connoisseur by contesting her Tajik descent) it is possible that a nineteenth-century narrator could afford to be less careful with the ethnicity of the characters. An interesting shift in ethnicity is found in the character Bakai, one of Manas' knights, who is a Sart in this tale (ibid.:148,149). In twentieth-century versions, Bakai is Manas' uncle and of Kyrgyz ethnicity. His role has evolved to Manas' main advisor, whereas in the tale recorded by Radloff, Bakai merely stands out by his love for and devotion to Manas. The word Sart today is no longer used as an actual ethnonym in Kyrgyz, but has become a derogatory term for Uzbeks and conveys high contempt for them as inhospitable, sly tradesmen.

The fourth poem that Radloff left us is called Bok-murun, a story that Valikhanov recorded too and had named The Memorial feast for Kōkōtōi-khan. The poem starts with Bokmurun's enumeration of the people he wants to invite to the memorial feast for his father Kōkōtōi. The first guests are indicated by their names only, as they are famous heroes themselves. The further away the messengers are sent, the more ethnic names we find. We find the Krim people (*Kirimdar*), the Goat (*Erkech*) and Dog (*It*) peoples, the Infidel (*Kapir*), the Orus, Kitai, Afghan (*Oogan*) and a number of people

identified by the name of their khan (ibid.:164-167). Interestingly, the khan of the Orus here is Joloi (see also ibid.:204,205), who in versions of other narrators is a Kalmak. The khan of the Krim people has the Turkic name Boz-uul. Thus, two clues mix up the ethnic map again in comparison with the previous poems.

Manas is not identified by an ethnic name for a long time, but when he sets off on his horse Ak-kula, the narrator asks: ‘will such another son of the Nogoi ever be born?’ (*Nogoidun oshundai uul tuar beken?*) (ibid.:170,171). A while later, a skirmish erupts between Muslims and Infidels. The Kaldai, Kalmak and Meiren all chase after the fleeing Burut. Manas then appoints Almambet and Sïrgak who set both the Muslims and Infidels flying (ibid.:174,175). The use of the ethnonym Burut is interesting, as it is generally seen as the name the Kalmak used to describe the Kyrgyz. Their role in this fight is unclear, but they do not seem to be Manas’ people. At the end of the poem, however, it looks like Manas is seen as a Burut by the enemies, because after Manas has killed Joloi, the Infidels of the Six Divisions say that the Burut have speared Joloi (ibid.:222,223).

The names Kaldai and Meiren are new to the ethnic scenery, and seem to denote subdivisions of the Kitai. Manas’ arch enemy Kongurbai, who is khan of the Kitai here, wants a horse to present to Manas’ other enemy Esen-khan, saying the horse is fit to ride for a Kaldai or a Meiren (ibid.:184,185). Joloi is also seen as a khan of the Kaldai and Meiren, although he is usually referred to as the khan of the Infidels (*kapir*), and twice as khan of the Orus (ibid.:212,213,216,217).

The word Kyrgyz comes back during the horse races, when the audience comments on the chances of the contestants and their horses. Although they know all the contestants by name and do not mention their ethnicity, two men are identified as Kyrgyz (ibid.:182,183). Also Manas’ enemy Kongurbai speaks of the Kyrgyz: ‘The wretched, misborn Kyrgyz will become fit for horse-fodder!’<sup>121</sup> (ibid.:184,185). In this speech, he mentions one other ethnic group: ‘Turned to grass, the rich Kazakh will be fit for bedding’<sup>122</sup> (ibid.). Later on, Manas tells his knights that there are horses who listen to shouts of Kangai, Altai, Orus, Oirot, Kyrgyz and Krim. But there is no battle cry ‘Alash’ or ‘Manas’! (ibid.:202,203). According to Talantaalı Bakchiev, Alash is said to be the first ancestor of the Kyrgyz and Kazakh. Perhaps the narrator meant to convey that Manas wanted to personify the existing battle cries, preferring loyalty to a hero to ethnic identification. His plea for new battle cries may also indicate that Manas’ ranks

<sup>121</sup> Radloff translates this rather differently: ‘And the few Kyrgyz will eat only horse fodder’ (Radloff, 1885:166). The Kyrgyz lines in Hatto’s book read: ‘*aradagi as Kïrgïs at jeminä jai bolor*’.

<sup>122</sup> Again, Radloff’s translation differs: ‘And the many rich Kazakh will discover their fate!’ Kyrgyz: ‘*Chöptöi bolgon bai Kazak töshögünö jai bolor!*’

are not represented by the above-mentioned ethnic groups. In the latter case, the narrator does not identify Manas and his troops as Kyrgyz.

Poem number five of Radloff is called Közkaman. In this tale, Közkaman, Manas' paternal uncle who has been abducted by Kalmaks as a child, comes forward to reclaim his part in Muslim society. He brings along five grown-up sons. Hatto introduces this poem as a tale to 'demonstrate the superiority of the 'Nogoy' (Kirghiz) ethos over the Kalmak ethos' (ibid.:227). However, there is no indication at all that Manas is either Nogoi or Kyrgyz in this poem. If anything, Manas seems to be a Sart. One of Közkaman's sons, who wishes to attack and end Manas calls him 'Manas, the Sart' (ibid.:276,277). This is in tune with the order of Khanikei to receive home-coming Manas in 'Sart-fashion', in this poem meaning as hospitable as possible (ibid.:232,233). The words Nogoi, Kyrgyz and Burut do not feature in this tale at all. The word Kalmak is used often, though, usually with the extension 'the many Kalmak that fill the Altai region' (*Altai tolgon köp Kalmak*) and 'the many Kalmak that fill the Künköi region' (*Künköi tolgon köp Kalmak*) (ibid.:242,243). The Kitai are often mentioned along with them, as when Jakip's wife calls the relatives 'come-from-the-Kalmak' and 'come-from-the-Kitai' (ibid.:250,251). Although usually Almambet is said to be Kitai, in this poem he is called a Kalmak by one of Manas' knights (ibid.:268,269), and he is said to speak the Kalmak tongue (ibid.:280,281). Actually, he is said to speak both the Muslim and Kalmak tongues, placing Manas and his people in the Muslim rather than a particular ethnic realm. The Kalmaks are once again Infidels (*kapir*) (ibid.: 300,301).

The last two poems deal with Semetei. In the introduction to these tales, Hatto claims once again that Manas and his relatives were Nogoi. But also in these poems, they are never addressed as Nogoi. The only Nogoi in the tale is Jamgırchı, who is Kara-Nogoi and an enemy of Manas' clan (ibid.:316,317). The only hint of a possible ethnic affiliation of Manas is found halfway, when Khanikei tells of the humiliation she suffered from Manas' younger brothers after Manas' death. She exclaims: '*Öz korduktan jat korduk, Özübekten Sart korduk!*', translated by Hatto as 'Humiliation from strangers is worse than from one's own people, humiliation from the Sart worse than from the Özbek!' (ibid.:320,321). Here, the Sart are distinct from the Uzbeks, and 'one's own people' are equated with the Uzbek. Radloff translates the passage quite differently, however: 'Own scorn is worse than strange scorn, the Özbek are subject to the Sart'. This comment seems entirely out of place and is probably translated incorrectly. When I asked Talantaalı by way of email what he thought, he gave me a third translation, or rather, explanation of the saying: 'Khanikei says: "Abuke and Kobosh have become like Sarts from the Uzbek, they do me wrong".' Talantaalı was

convinced that in the old text too, the Sarts are enemies and Manas could never be anything but Kyrgyz.<sup>123</sup>

In the last poem published by Radloff, the only ethnic group mentioned are the Kalmak, when at a certain point one of Semetei's knight wants to go to the Kalmak to take (or rather probably steal) a pair of rams (ibid.:350,351). Hatto claims that both Khanıkey and Semetei's wife Ai-chürök are 'foreign' (ibid.:305), but it is unclear how he determined this about Ai-chürök. In these poems, it is said that she is the daughter of Akın-khan (ibid.:346,347), who has a people (*el*) (ibid.:348,349). Perhaps it is this piece of information that leads Hatto to assert Ai-chürök is foreign.

This analysis of the use of ethnic names in Radloff's poems illustrates a number of things. First of all, Manas was not the undoubtedly Kyrgyz character he became in later versions. Further, Hatto's assertion that he was Nogoi should also be questioned. Manas' ethnicity shifts from tale to tale, probably from narrator to narrator, but as Radloff has not indicated which poem was told by whom, it is even possible that one narrator ascribes varied ethnicities to Manas in different recitals. Reading the poems, it seems that Manas' ethnic affiliation was subordinate to his identity as a Muslim, as a khan in Talas, and as a personality. His enemies are more often identified by their ethnic origin, although they too are just as often referred to as personalities or as Infidels. In the case of an ethnic label for the enemies, we find complicated and once again, shifting interconnections. The Kalmaks (nowadays seen to have been Mongol Buddhists from China) are at times named separately from, and then sometimes as identical to Kitai. Usually Kitai are Chinese peoples, although on occasion, their Turkic names (e.g. Kara-khan) suggest otherwise. The Orus may point to Russians, Krim Tatars or to the people of Joloi, who is usually a Kalmak.

The other nineteenth-century Manas text we have, Valikhanov's recording of Kökötöi-khan's Memorial Feast, also uses a number of different ethnonyms for Manas, his companions and his enemies.

In Valikhanov's recording of Kökötöi-khan's Memorial Feast, we find that Manas is referred to as a Sart (Hatto, 1977:8,9). Kökötöi's son Bok-murun speaks of Manas as:

*'Anjıyannıng tong almasın kemirgen*      'Biting unripe apples of your Anjıyan

---

<sup>123</sup> Talantaalı told me to be careful with quotes from the Manas, because: 'Many words in the Manas may have been said from a different perspective. Or one word has several meanings. For instance, like in the code of the painter Da Vinci. One can attach many meanings to his paintings. The Bible and the K'uran, and also the Manas can be understood in many different ways.'

<i>chiyki nanga semirgen</i>	getting fat on unbaked bread
<i>Samarkanda Sart Manas</i>	is the Sart Manas in Samarkand
<i>sari da kulak it Manas',</i>	the yellow-eared dog Manas'

Hatto sees the word Sart as a term of abuse and points at Radloff's poem Közkaman, where someone tries to persuade others to kill Manas treacherously when he calls Manas a Sart (ibid.:121). In the above quoted passage, Manas is not described positively. It is possible that a narrator would let a character call Manas a Sart when he wanted to make clear this character was an adversary of Manas. Prior has taken this passage to mean that Bokmurun defies Manas' authority, and identifies the poem as a power struggle between two heroes (Prior, 2002:131)

Bok-murun is a Sari Nogai in this poem, which can be deduced from the fact that his father Kökötöi is introduced as Sari Nogai. Bok-murun speaks of how he is going to feast with and honour the Infidel khan Joloi and the Kalmaks. These are Manas' main enemies, and Bok-murun's friendship with them makes it unlikely that Manas is a Sari Nogai too as Hatto and Valikhanov suggest. Actually, Valikhanov puts it as follows:

The main hero of the poems is the hero Manas, the son of Yakup, in the beginning called the head of the Nogay from Chu to Talas<sup>124</sup>, in other parts of the poem as an Andijaner, and sometimes a Samarkand Sart (Valikhanov translated in Aliev et.al., 1995:24).

Apart from this reference of Manas as a Sart, Manas is only identified as a hero (*baatır*) (Hatto, 1977:30,31), a Padishah (ibid.:34,35), indirectly as a Muslim, and twice as 'Manas, son of Jakip, son of Kara-khan, son of Chayan-khan, son of Böyön-khan' (ibid.:20,21,26,27).

The enemies are identified again as Infidels (ibid.:16,17), Kalmaks (ibid.:24,25) or Kitai (ibid.:4,5). Their ethnicity is again more pronounced than the ethnic affiliation of Manas and his allies.

The Kyrgyz are mentioned at the very end of the poem, when the narrator sums up the people Manas harassed and raided. The Kalmak and Kitai are mentioned, and the Kokanders, that are later called the Özbegs, but strangely enough also the Kazakh and Kyrgyz are said to not have been left in peace by Manas (ibid.:86-89). Of the Kyrgyz the narrator says:

<i>Oy jakalay üy bar,</i>	There are yurts at the end of the valley
<i>Üy bash sayın biyi bar:</i>	Every yurt's head is a <i>biy</i>
<i>Jalgız atın taptagan,</i>	Only one horse is found
<i>Jalang nayza saptagan,</i>	Only one spear is counted

---

<sup>124</sup> There is no reference to Manas as 'head of the Nogay from Chu to Talas' to be found in Hatto's publication of Valikhanov's manuscript.

<i>‘Kirgiz’ degen pachadan</i>	From the fellows called ‘Kyrgyz’
<i>kolturmashtan bala algan,</i>	he took the boys from their saddle-cradles
<i>kokuylatıp er saygan,</i>	he stabbed the warriors, who cried out in pain
<i>oshogu-menen kız algan,</i>	thus taken the girls
<i>kurgur jurtun tagı algan</i>	he scarred this dried people (ibid.:86, my translation)

This too indicates that Manas was not a Kyrgyz in the nineteenth-century tales, as he became later on.

Although Manas may not be a Kyrgyz in the early versions, Radloff, Valikhanov and Hatto all do ascribe the epic to the Kyrgyz as their piece of art. Valikhanov wrote in *Sketches of Jungaria*:

An episode of the poem of Manas, namely the memorial feast for Kokutay-khan, was written down by me at the dictation of a Kirgiz rhapsode. It is probably the first Kirgiz discourse to have been transferred to paper. I shall address myself to a translation of this product of Kirgiz poetry (...) (Valikhanov in Hatto, 1977:93).

In Radloff’s introduction we find this notion described more indirectly:

A completely different image is offered by the epic songs of the Black Kyrgyz [*schwarzen Kirgisen*]; here the *Volksgeist* of the Kyrgyz total mass of epic folk songs has merged into one whole. (...) The actual centre of the complete folk poetry portrays the heroic image of the ideal Muslim monarch, Er Manas, the son of Jakip Kan, of the Sarı Nogai tribe (Radloff, 1885:VIII, IX).

It should be kept in mind that Radloff and Valikhanov did not employ the word Kyrgyz as it is used today. For Radloff, the Kyrgyz (*Kirgisen* in German) are a large group of Turkic steppe nomads, encompassing ethnic groups from the Caspian sea to China. He distinguishes between the *Kasak-Kirgisen* and *Kara-Kirgisen* (Radloff, 1893:406), which corresponds to the present-day distinction between Kazaks and Kyrgyz. Radloff explains that the *Kara-Kirgisen* are the only Turkic people to call themselves *Kyrgys* in his days (Radloff, 1885:I). From the quote of a self-mocking saying among *Kirgisen*, we learn that the *Kasak-Kirgisen* called themselves *Kasak*:

*Kaschkyr, Kasak hām Orus-kasak üsch againy*  
(Wolf, Kirgise und Kosak sind drei Brüder)<sup>125</sup> (Radloff, 1893:407).

Valikhanov speaks of ‘*dikokamennykh Kirgiz*’, which literally means ‘Kyrgyz of the wild rock’ (Valikhanov translated in Aliev et.al., 1995:23). He describes himself as ‘Kirgiz’ in

---

<sup>125</sup> Wolf, Kirgis and Kosak are three brothers.

his Russian texts. Famous explorer Semenov Tien-Shianski and Russian administration investigator Count K.K. Pahlen also used the term Kirgiz, Kara-Kirgiz and Dikokamennykh Kirgiz. The editors who reissued their works have added footnotes to explain that they really mean Kazakh and Kyrgyz (Semenov, 1998:17, footnote 1; 23, footnote 2, Pierce, 1964:23, footnote 1). My informants told me the exact same thing. Sociologist Oruzbaeva carefully explained to me how these terms should be understood:

Until the Revolution, the Kazakhs were called Kirgiz in Russian literature, and the Kyrgyz Kara-Kirgiz, or *Japai-too* (Kyrgyz, litt: wild mountain) Kirgiz. This was not because they were a wild people, but because they lived in the wild mountains. ‘*Kara*’ did not mean that they were black like Africans, but merely to distinguish them from the Kazakhs. *Kara* comes from *kara budun*, which means hard-working people. Even today we speak of *kara jumush*, which means work that is done with your hands. In Kazakh there is also the expressions *ak sök* (white bone) and *kara sök* (black bone), which stands for nobility and ordinary folk. So Kara-Kirgiz meant that they were ordinary people, not a people of khans.

None of my informants could explain why the Russians had developed this terminology, whether they were merely mistaken, or whether the situation was more complex than a simple equation with present terminology suggests. The Afghan ethnologist Shahrani, who conducted fieldwork among the Pamir Kyrgyz in the 1970s, has an entirely alternate explanation for the ethnonyms:

There are two main groups of Kirghiz known in the literature: the Qara Qirghiz or Kara Kirghiz, the ‘genuine’ or ‘true’ Kirghiz (not Black Kirghiz as has been suggested; Krader 1963; Jochelson 1928); Kirghiz or Kirghiz-Kazakh, an appellation adopted by the Russians to distinguish the Kazakhs from the Cossacks. The Kirghiz of the Afghan Pamirs consider themselves to be the Kara Kirghiz, the ‘genuine’ Kirghiz, and the Kirghiz-Kazakh are referred to by them as Otez Oghul (thirty sons) (Shahrani, 1979:50).

It seems likely that Shahrani learned this from his informants, a group of Kyrgyz who had fled away from communism, first to China and later to the Pamirs. Under these different conditions, their views on the meaning of various ethnonyms underwent an alternate development. Caution ought to be taken when seeing one as more true to the actual nineteenth-century situation than the other. One should merely realise that contemporary explanations have been influenced by the times. Shahrani’s quote might indicate that Kara Kyrgyz was a self-denominator, or at least an ethnonym accepted by the Kyrgyz by the

early twentieth century which was carried into the Pamirs. The use of the word Kirghiz in relation to the Kazakh is again explained as a Russian invention, with the plausible reason of a distinctive term for Cossacks and Kazakhs.

Still, all of this does not explain why the Russians would apply the name of a small group of mountain nomads who resided far to the East, to a larger group of steppe nomads that lived close to Russia. A more intricate pattern must have been behind this. Perhaps the ancient Kyrgyz of the Yenisey River had indeed been so well-known that their name had entered Russian ethnic mappings. 'Kyrgyz' could have been the name for a Kazakh clan that lived close to the Russians. Or perhaps the distinction between Kyrgyz and Kazakh as entirely different ethnic groups was a development that only gained momentum with the entrance of the Soviet Union. Whatever the relation between Kyrgyz, Kara-Kyrgyz and Kazakhs was in the nineteenth century, the epic that was told by Kyrgyz bards did not feature Kyrgyz heroes. For Hatto, this compares well to the Greek situation of Homer's tales, as he stated in various articles:

The mid-nineteenth-century epics in the Kirghiz tongue are seemingly not concerned with the Kirghiz. They are instead concerned with the 'Nogoy'. In Kirghiz epic of this time the Nogoy stood to the Kirghiz rather as Homer's Achæens stood to the Greeks. Yet the Nogoy were heroes of a Heroic Age which, unlike the Greek Heroic Age, reached almost into the present (...) In Kirghiz epic of the mid-nineteenth century, however, this was all forgotten. There the Nogoy were idealized Kirghiz projected into a continuum spanning the past and near-present (Hatto, 1980:312).

According to Hatto, this practice of identifying with another ethnic group had a further advantage, as it gave the narrators the possibility to describe both the ideal and the actual situation:

It is touching that from the eminence of Kirghiz self-identification in song with the glorious Nogay, the old bards look down in scorn on the poverty stricken Kirgiz of real life on some of the rare occasions they mention them (Hatto, 1977:90).

Daniel Prior recently discussed a poem written in 1909-1910 that fits very well with the idea that Manas was a Nogoï in the older tales (Prior 2006:81). In this poem ascribed to Musa Chagatayev, the poet gives his own opinion on contemporary folklore:



<i>Kazak, Nogoi, baarī bar</i>	There are tales of the Kazakhs, Nogois, and all of them
<i>Kirgīzdan kīsa kōrbōdīm</i>	But I have never seen one about the Kyrgyz
<i>Baarīn jazgan Orustun</i>	Let me write down, as far as I know,
<i>Bilgenemche jazayīn</i>	everything written about by the Russians
<i>Ar kaysī baatīr urushun</i>	every sort of fight between heroes
<i>Nogoi eken Manasīng</i>	They say your Manas is a Nogoi
<i>Kirgīzdīn jeri Talasīng</i>	But your Talas is the land of Kyrgyz
<i>Oz baatīrīng aytalbai</i>	Unable to speak about your own heroes
<i>Munu da irdap kalasīng!</i>	You will sing their songs!
<i>Manastan Shabdan kem emes</i>	Shabdan is no less than Manas
<i>Shabdandan Manas er emes</i>	Manas is no greater man than Shabdan
<i>Bayakege Almambet</i>	And Almambet, it is perfectly plain
<i>Anīk jeri teng emes</i>	was no match for Bayake (ibid., translation provided by Prior)

For this poet too, Manas was a Nogoi hero. His plea for creating Kyrgyz songs seems to match the advent of the Kyrgyzification of Manas in later versions.

From the above analysis of the nineteenth-century Manas tales that we do have access to, there is not enough evidence that Manas was always seen as a Nogoi or Nogai. Although Hatto's theory of the Nogai as an idealised people seems attractive, the lack of evidence to confirm this basic assumption decreases its value. What remains is that Manas was not the indisputable Kyrgyz he is today. Instead of dismissing this development as 'tampering with the tradition' (Hatto, 1980:312), however, we should see the flexible use of (ethnic) identities as part of the tradition. Present-day narrators are aware of the influence they may have on the contents of the tale, and realise that versions of the Manas will continue to change. Talantaalī Bakchiev told me:

Telling the Manas is a combination of being called and your own effort. Everyone tells Manas from his own heart, that is why you get different perspectives.

Sagimbai spoke of Manas as a Muslim because he was a *moldo* himself. I do not use the Islam because Manas lived 1,000 to 2,000 years ago, long before Islam. But you know, during Soviet years, there was a Semeteichi who believed strongly in socialism. His versions features a five-year plan.

The role of ethnicity in the nineteenth-century versions, then, differed from later versions. Manas was either of indistinct or clearly non-Kyrgyz ethnicity, and the ethnicity of his enemies and allies varied. Only the role of the Kitai and Kalmaks was clear: they were

always enemies. With other enemies, religion was a more important distinction than ethnicity. Also, the personalities of the heroes and their personal relations received far more attention than their ethnic background.

#### 4.1.3 Manas becomes Kyrgyz

Some sixty years after Radloff and Valikhanov recorded their Manas tales, Sagımbai's version was transcribed to paper. By this time, Manas had become a Kyrgyz<sup>126</sup>. As we have seen in the anti-Manas poem of Musa Chagataev, there had been calls for singing songs about Kyrgyz instead of Nogois or Kazakhs, the first sign of increased adherence to Kyrgyz ethnic identity. Sagımbai seems to have agreed with this idea. It is not clear how novel Sagımbai's portrayal of Manas as a Kyrgyz was, but it is the first available source for us today. Sagımbai's version puts a far greater stress on ethnicity than his predecessors by mentioning the ethnic background of the most epic characters, friend and foe alike. This version was recorded in the time of the Soviet *korenizatsia* policy, when ethnicity had become a very important asset for those who wanted to climb the social ladder. Furthermore, pan-Turkism was countered by stressing the differences between Turkic groups, and as such, it is possible that Sagımbai was influenced by this political tide. Interestingly, however, Sagımbai's version was later considered to have pan-Turkic elements. His association with the Jadid-schooled folklore collectors Miftakov and Abdırakhmanov seems to have had a stronger impact than the Soviet propagation of ethnicity.

In the Kyrgyz publication of 1978, it is not until page 117 that we are explicitly told which ethnic group Manas belongs to. Here, Manas has reached the age where he begins to ask his father about his forefathers. Jakıp answers:

<i>Oo, balam, urugung kïrgïz-türk dep</i>	Oh my son, your tribe is Kyrgyz-Turk
<i>Ökümöt kïlgan bababiz</i>	Our forefather, who created a state,
<i>Kitaidin jurtun sürüp dep</i>	Conquered the Kitai people
(...)	(...)
<i>Chong atang atı Nогоi dep</i>	Your grandfathers name was Nогоi

(Manas 1978:117)

<sup>126</sup> In the 1970s' publications of the 1920s' manuscripts at least, Manas was a Kyrgyz. Of course, we cannot rule out the possibility that ethnicity was one of the fields that was subject to censorship. Unfortunately, I do not have the manuscript or the 1940s' publications available for comparison.

Previous to this passage, Sagımbai has already given some allusions to Manas being a Kyrgyz. Jakıp is said to have but few ‘Kyrgyz’ (i.e. inhabitants) in his village (ibid.:75) and to collect 70 houses of ‘his Kyrgyz’ (ibid.:78). Manas herds the sheep with Chegebai, the grandson of ‘the Kyrgyz Kadoobai’ (ibid.:93). When Manas encounters an old Kalmak man, the Kalmak asks: ‘Whose son is this *Burut*?’ (ibid.:100).

Other ethnic groups have also been mapped out before Manas is told about his background. Sagımbai has described the men that Jakıp asks for advice by name and ethnicity: the bai of the Kyrgyz Baktıgul, from the Kazakhs old Üyshün, from the Kyrgyz Baijigit, from the Kıpçak Taz, from the Noiguts Akbalta, from the Nogoi warrior Eshtek, Türk’s son Dambılda and Tümönbai’s Abdılda (ibid.:44, 86). Interestingly, the names of ethnic groups (*ulut*), tribes (*uruu*), paternity and even the overarching term Türk (which in this form may indicate either a particular person or the entire Turkic people) are mixed in this enumeration. This can point to a general fluidity of these concepts, which is also illustrated by the use of the word Nogoi in Sagımbai’s recorded text. Nogoi is the name of Manas’ grandfather, although in the above quote Nogoi seems to be a separate ethnic group, and elsewhere, Akbalta is introduced as being ‘from the Kyrgyz tribe Nogoi’ (Manas 1995f:36). At one point, Manas is referred to as a Nogoi, when his enemy Neskara is warned by his horse that among those who are known as Nogois, a youngster by the name Manas will come after his head (ibid.:166,167).

However, as we are dealing with epic poetry and not systematic genealogy, it is imperative to remember that the aesthetics of rhyme and rhythm may overrule systematic categorisation.

In Sagımbai’s version, the ethnicity and the place of origin of the characters is stated much more explicitly than in the earlier Manas texts. Personality is still an important feature in the portrayal of heroes and in their ability to mobilise support. But here, a hero’s personality is always combined with his ethnicity. The epithets Muslim and Infidel, popular in the older versions, do not appear until Manas has grown up. However, there is the possibility that the importance of religion was reduced in the editing process for their publication in 1978. That the place of religion in Sagımbai’s Manas was a topic for discussion during the Soviet Union is still noticeable today: Sagımbai is portrayed as a *moldo* and his version is seen to have more Islamic elements than others.

An interesting question remains as to how Sagımbai’s ethnic mapping corresponds to the ethnic maps of his days. Did he place Manas, his friends and his foes into the current ideas of ethnic groups and their relations? Or do the heroes live in an imagined past, in a

historic perspective, comparable to transposing the Arthur tales from a world of Saxons and Romans into present day? This question cannot be answered without a better understanding of ethnic mappings in the early twentieth century, which is as yet an understudied area.

#### **4.2 The Soviets and Ethnicity**

In Sagımbai's days, the importance of ethnicity gained momentum. The first group to busy themselves with ethnic categorisation were Russian observers with scholarly or political interest in categorising the inhabitants of Central Asia into ethnic groups. This led to a system of ethnonyms that was probably quite different from the ethnic maps in the minds of the recital-givers and audience of the *Manas*. Count Pahlen, for instance, speaks only of Kirgiz and Sarts, a gross simplification of the mosaic, and probably quite distinct from the self-denominators of that time. Secondly, there was the Jadid movement that was supported by what Daniel Prior terms 'New Turks'. The Bashkir education inspector and folklore collector Miftakov and his co-workers are prime examples of this group of people. For the New Turks a division into ethnic groups, both Turkic and non-Turkic, was also essential. This may or may not have been an alien approach for the local residents. In any case, they were picked up by a number of people from the region. Prior cites the work of Belek Soltonoyev, who wrote "History of the Kyrgyz" (*Kirgiz Tarikhi*) (Prior, 2002:189). Soltonoyev, a colleague of Miftakov at the Scientific Centre of the Kirghiz Education Commissariat, was a member of the Ayuke Sarıbagış clan. The title of his book alone illustrates that by this time, the term 'Kyrgyz' was a concept that worked as an identification marker, and that represented a group unified enough to qualify for a common historiography. However, the manuscript was written between 1895 and 1935, a period of forty years, and Soltonoyev did not specify at which time he wrote what. We can therefore not be sure that the title of the book was pre-Soviet and it very well may have been inspired by Soviet concepts of ethnicity.

The third party responsible for enhancing the position of ethnicity in social interaction was the Soviet government. This may seem contradictory to the communist idea that in the ideal state, class solidarity exceeds all other forms of solidarity, and further to the current view that the Soviet Union dominated and suppressed the ethnic groups living in its territory. The role of nationalism in the Soviet Union was more complex than that, however. Whether nationalism was a relatively recent phenomenon in the early twentieth century, as most Western scholars agree, or an innate part of human nature, as

most former-Soviet Union scholars believe, it formed a part of the social map at the time that socialist ideas were developed and, after the Revolution, turned into practice. The two ideals of class solidarity and the right of self-development for all nations were indispensable elements of political debate for both leaders and the population whose support they sought. Finding practical solutions for the inherent tensions between these two ideals led to a unique administrative division of the state into an unprecedented high number of national<sup>127</sup> units. This process of division, known as the national demarcation, led to a structure of fifteen national republics, which often housed several autonomous regions named after other ethnic groups in the territory. Within this federal structure, many collective farms were specified along ethnic lines as well. In the Kyrgyz SSR, for example, there was a German collective farm called *Rotfront*, not far from Frunze. Ethnic categorisation went even further than this elaborate territorial division, it also became personal. Every citizen of the Soviet Union had an officially registered *natsionalnost* (ethnicity), which was based on (usually paternal) descent. This *natsionalnost* was registered in passports and on other official documents. Furthermore, strong emphasis was placed on the development of national languages and on raising the population's literacy in these languages. Indigenisation of the political and economic elite was actively pursued. Also, a set of folkloric symbols was attached to every ethnic group, giving them a face, a history and legitimacy.

The origins of this policy of active institutionalisation of nationhood lie in the fierce debates on the position of nations that were held among the Russian communists before the revolution. According to Terry Martin, this debate was held between internationalists such as Georgii Piatakov and Nikolai Bukharin and the nation-builders led by Vladimir Lenin and Josef Stalin (Martin, 2001:4). Martin argues that Lenin agreed with the internationalists, in that nationalism was a bourgeois trick that presented legitimate social grievances in a national form. However, he also felt that it was a good trick, which could work in favour of the Soviets if it was properly used. By granting the forms of nationhood, the Soviet state would undermine the above-class national alliance for statehood (ibid.:5). Lenin also believed that national self-awareness was an unavoidable historic phase that all people must pass through on the way to internationalism (ibid.). In 1916, he stated that 'mankind can proceed towards the inevitable fusion of nations only through a transitional period of complete freedom of all oppressed nations' (ibid.). Furthermore, Lenin was wary

---

<sup>127</sup> The Russian word *natsionalnii* corresponds closer to the English ethnicity than national, as it refers to an ethnic group rather than a civic state.

of Great Russian chauvinism. In 1919, he exclaimed on a Party Congress: ‘Scratch any Communist and you find a Great Russian chauvinist... he sits in many of us and we must fight him’ (ibid.:3).

In 1912, Lenin ordered Stalin to write a survey of Marxist theories on nationalism, and to formulate the Russian socialist position on the issue<sup>128</sup>. This resulted in the essay *Marxism and the National Question*. In this book, Stalin advocates the idea of territorial autonomy as the only proper form for the nations’ right for self-determination. The reasons why this is so remain a mystery, however, due to the contradictory images that Stalin gives of the nation. On the one hand, Stalin explains that nations are a historical category specific to the stage of rising capitalism (Stalin, 1948:21). On the other hand, he speaks of nations as natural entities, with a life and a fate, with rights and virtues (ibid.:28). Furthermore, Stalin argues that members of nations change when they migrate for work. The idea of cultural-national autonomy, that organises members of a nation no matter where they live, thus contradicts the interests of the working class. National fences should not be strengthened, but destroyed and torn down (ibid.:47-49). But then, Stalin proposes territorial autonomy for all nations (ibid.:84). He spends pages criticising the idea of national autonomy, propagated by Austrian social-democrats, dismissing it as nationalism in disguise and as such, far more dangerous than bourgeois nationalism. However, his own idea of territorial autonomy does not differ all that much from the national autonomy he condemned. The difference in Stalin’s eyes is that he speaks of ‘real’ nations with a territory, instead of fiction (ibid.). He admits that there is no territory that is nationally homogenous, because every territory has been penetrated by national minorities. But he sees no problems as long as these nations are given what they need: the right to use their mother tongue, their own schooling, freedom of movement and freedom of conscience (ibid.:85). Stalin’s arguments thus alternate between seeing nations as products of capitalism and susceptible to change when members of the nation migrate and seeing them as real, unchangeable and fixed in a territory. Sometimes he speaks of nations as created by people in a certain historic context, at other times they are primordial bodies in an indisputable form. The book thus does not offer a logically sound explanation for the choice of territorial autonomy of nations. It merely sums up ideas, rejects others, and leaves the reader with unanswered questions.

---

<sup>128</sup> According to Leon Trotsky, Lenin assigned this task to Stalin to keep him out of the country during the crucial period of reorganisation of the St. Petersburg Central Committee. Stalin himself was not eager to return to Russia either after his defeat at the Cracow Conference (L. Trotsky, 1947:151).

In regard to the conflicting interests of nations and classes, Stalin is much less ambiguous. He argues that nations have complete freedom of self-determination, even the freedom to secede, but only if their choices are supported by the social democratic movement (ibid.:28). The obligation of the social democratic movement is to defend the interests of the proletariat, and therefore it should aim at taking off the sharp edges of suppressive nationalism and undermining the battle between nations by reducing it to a minimum (ibid.:29). Self-determination then is limited to the confines of social democracy.

According to Yuri Slezkine, many of Lenin and Stalin's contemporaries opposed the idea of national-territorial autonomy and saw it as a danger to class solidarity (Slezkine, 1994:420). A number of them warned against the 'absurdity of federalism' that would lead to an endless 'breeding of republics' (ibid.). However, according to Slezkine:

Lenin lost the argument but won the vote because, as Tomskii put it, while "not a single person in this room would say that national self-determination or national movements were either normal or desirable", most people seemed to believe they were a "necessary evil" that had to be tolerated (ibid.:421).

By 1922, the nationalities policy could no longer be questioned, and when the tenth Party Congress legitimised the policy of national-territorial autonomy, it was no longer called a necessary evil (ibid.:422).

The Bolsheviks' answer to the tensions between class and national interests was dealt with by producing an extremely refined system of territorial autonomy for nations, overarched by a structure of socialist Soviets. Stalin spoke of proletarian culture to be 'national in form, socialist in content' (Brubaker, 1996:36), a phrase often repeated both in- and outside the Soviet Union, as it summarised the nationalities policy so well. However, this approach did not solve the tensions. In many cases, it actually strengthened it, as the Soviets undertook a high amount of nation-building to fit the numerous and complexly interrelated population into their theoretical and ideological mould. We can detect four pillars in this process of ethnic consolidation: the demarcation of the Tsarist Empire in national-autonomous territories, the assignment of an official ethnicity to all citizens, the *korenizatsia* policy that advanced local elites and promoted national languages, and nation-building through folklorisation.

The process of national demarcation began in 1923 and was largely completed in 1936. Renewed interpretations of the status of specific ethnic groups, often induced by lobbying activities of ethnic leaders, led to a number of shifts in the original design. The 1936 Constitution of the USSR put an end to this lobbying and re-drafting, although over

the years a small number of changes followed. In the 1936 Constitution, the USSR consisted of 11 union republics and 20 autonomous republics (Tishkov, 1997:34). By the time of its demise, the Soviet Union included 53 national territories: 15 union republics, 20 autonomous republics, 8 autonomous regions (*oblast*) and 10 autonomous districts (*okrug*) (ibid.). Before the national demarcation, the territory of present-day Kyrgyzstan fell into the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic that was established in 1918. The Turkestan ASSR was part of the Russian Federation (Rashid, 1994:142). In 1924, the Kara-Kyrgyz Autonomous Region was formed within the structure of the RSFSR. In 1925, the autonomous region was transformed into an autonomous republic, and in 1926 renamed as Kyrgyz Autonomous Soviet Republic. In 1936, the territory was converted into a sovereign Union republic (ibid.:143, Korth, 2005:134) and was henceforth known as the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic.

The second pillar, that of assigning an official ethnicity to all citizens, was intended as a process of mapping out the ethnic groups as they were ‘out there’. Valery Tishkov, eminent Russian anthropology professor and former Minister for Nationalities in the Yeltsin government, strongly opposes this primordial approach which dominates the academic and political scene in the former Soviet Union even today. He substantiates his constructivist approach with examples of ‘Soviet ethnic engineering’ that took place in the early years of the Soviet Union. According to Tishkov, in the Tsarist Empire it was not ethnicity but religion and language that were regarded as the principles for group belonging (Tishkov, 1997:30). In the 1897 census, 146 different languages and dialects were registered. At the time of the 1926 census, however, ethnicity (*narodnost*) had become an important category, which:

produced the spectacular result of some 190 different identities displaying varying sorts of particularism, from locality to clan affiliation. (...) this list of 190 ‘national’ identities immediately became the subject of scholarly ethnographic processing and political manipulations that have continued to this day. Ethnographers, linguists, and historians went to work to redefine the list by declaring some identities dialectal, sub-ethnic, or local variants of larger *ethnoses*. Many new names were given; many groups were renamed. In the end, scholars labelled all nations and *narodnosti* (‘peoples’) and created a hierarchy of ethnic groups (ibid.:31).

Ethnographers and other scholars played an important role in drafting the borders of national republics by making an inventory of national groups. Confined to the assignment of mapping out nations that were believed to be ‘out there’ and clear-cut, they often found



themselves in a dilemma. Tishkov reveals that Vladimir Dolgikh told him that he was most likely wrong in creating dual ethnic autonomies in Western Siberia (Khanty-Mansi, Dolgano-Nenetz, etc.), because there were equally good arguments for qualifying these groups as different ethnoses (ibid.:19). Yelena Peschereva confessed to a colleague that she had ‘given birth to thousands of Tajiks’ by simply registering them as such, so as to suit the purposes of the Committee on national-territorial demarcation (ibid.:20).

Once a certain number of nations had been defined, other self-identifiers were fitted into this system. Tishkov provides a table that shows a large number of ethnic identities that were given during censuses. These had to be aggregated into larger ethnic categories, in different ways over time. Table 4.1 offers the section on the Kyrgyz and Kazakh from this table, where we can see that in the 1937 census, there was room for clan names as ethnic self-identifying markers for both Kazakh and Kyrgyz. In the 1989 census, the Kazakh were still subdivided, be it in entirely different subdivisions, but the Kyrgyz were merely registered as Kyrgyz. Ethnic names such as Nogoi, Kïpchak, Naiman and Burut, that featured in the early versions of the Manas, found their way into these categorisations, be it differently in each census.

*Table 4.1 Non-registered names included into official census category*

*Source: Tishkov, 1997:16-17*

<b>Official census category</b>	<b>Census 1926</b>	<b>Census 1937</b>	<b>Census 1989</b>
Kazakh	kirgiz-kazaki, kirgiz-kajsaki	adban, alimuly, argyn, bajuly, girgizoj, dzheti-urug, dzhityru, dulat, kazakh-kirgizy, kirgiz-kazakhi, kirej, kishidzhyuz, ulu-dzhyuz, chala-kazakhi. chaprashty	kazak, adaj, alban, argyn, bersh, beskalmak, dulat, zhagalbajly, zhalair, zhappas, kerej, kongrat, kypchak, najman, nogyj, oshakty, sary-usjun, srgejli, suan, tabyn, tama, tortkara, uak, sherkesh, shakty, ysty
Kirgiz	kirgizy, buruty, karakirgizy, kyrgyz-kypchaki	asyk, bagysh, bugu, buruty, ichkilik, kamennye kirgizy, karakirgizy, kushchu, munduz, on, sarybagysh, sayak, sol, soru, sultu, khadyrsha	kyrgyz

In 1999, a new population census was held. Questions on language and ethnicity were included, and although people readily supplied their answers, on further questioning these answers turned out to have interesting background stories. I did not encounter people who claimed clan or other non-‘national’ identities, because it was clear by now which terms were passable ethnonyms. The choice between ethnonyms, however, sometimes did have an interesting history. I asked the head of a university department, a lady in her fifties, what ethnicity (R: *natsionalnost*, K: *ulut*) she had entered. She explained:

I said I am Kyrgyz. Both my parents were Kyrgyz. Well, actually my father was Uyghur. As a child he came from China to Kyrgyzstan and was raised in a Kyrgyz family. He forgot his own language and became completely Kyrgyz. He married a Kyrgyz woman. In the village they called him 'the Uzbek', and that's why they put Uzbek in my birth certificate. The civil servant didn't even ask my father what he should fill in, he just did what he thought was correct. When I got my passport at 18, I found a calligraphic pen and filled in 'Kyrgyz' myself. You see, I am not Uzbek, I don't look like Uzbeks and I don't speak the language.

The third pillar of the nationalities policy comprised of *korenizatsia*, the ‘policy of supporting the use of non-Russian languages and the creation of non-Russian elites in the non-Russian territories’ (Martin, 2001:463). The right to use one’s native language was considered one of the most important inalienable rights, foremost on the agenda of national minorities, and if guaranteed, high on the list of reasons why national minorities would embrace socialism. Language also served as the most commonly used indicator of ethnicity in the process of national demarcation, next to religion and customs (Slezkine, 1994:428).

In the case of Turkestan, according to Slezkine:

Linguistic, cultural and religious differences between the Kazakh, Kirgiz and Turkmen might be negligible, but their clan genealogies were so clearly drawn and so vigorously upheld that most ethnographers had no choice but to follow (ibid.:429).

Slezkine is probably right in his assertion that the Kazakh and Kyrgyz languages were very close to each other in the early twentieth century. In the 1860s, Radloff observed that an audience of Kazakhs (*Kirgisen*) easily understood the language of a Kyrgyz (*Kara-Kirgise*) bard. Of course, this remark does not prove that Kazakh and Kyrgyz were similar. In fact, it even suggests that they were seen as two separate languages – at least by Radloff. Nowadays, however, both Kazakhs and Kyrgyz claim that their languages are almost the same, apart from a number of standard differences in vowel use. These differences were

standardised in the process of codification of the languages. Thus, dialects that were similar in the local context became distinct when they were connected to a 'pure' core version.

Kyrgyz was codified on the basis of the Northern dialect (Korth, 2005:78). The Arabic script was used, which was a continuation of pre-revolutionary practice of the literate Kyrgyz who used Arabic letters for Kyrgyz and the lingua franca Chagatai Turkic (ibid.:65). This codified version of Kyrgyz, along with its letters, was spread when the first schools teaching in Kyrgyz opened in 1926 (ibid.:88). In the following decade, Kyrgyz changed its alphabet twice. In 1925, it was decided that Kyrgyz writing had to shift to the Latin script. Arabic was said to be inaccessible to the masses and not suitable for Turkic languages, the Latin script was perceived to be better fit for modernity (ibid.:78). It seems likely that a dissociation from the Muslim world was at least a welcome side-effect. By 1931 the Arabic alphabet had been replaced completely by Latin letters (ibid.:79). In 1930, compulsory school attendance was introduced (ibid.:89), which intensified language and other teaching. By 1939, the literacy rate among the population of the Kirgiz SSR had reached 79.8% (ibid.:90). In this year, however, all Soviet languages had to change to the Cyrillic script. It was argued that the Cyrillic alphabet would facilitate an even stronger unification of the peoples of the USSR (ibid.:82), and Latin was now perceived as a bourgeois script. In 1944, as the apogee of Kyrgyz codification, the extensive Kyrgyz-Russian dictionary compiled by K.K. Yudakhin was published.

Although the advance of literacy set off with the propagation of standardised Kyrgyz, from the late 1930s onwards, a process of "Russification" set in. Under Krushchev, Russian was termed the 'second mother tongue' for all peoples of the USSR (ibid.:85), and the language came to play an increasingly important role in public life, eventually pushing aside the 'national' languages.

The second objective of the *korenizatsia* policy - the creation of local elites - opened the floor for a number of young Kyrgyz who had been educated during Tsarist times. They were welcomed in the highest echelons of the local administration, but soon found themselves in tricky waters. Already in 1922, communist leaders such as Abdikerim Sidi'kov were excluded from the Party. Sidi'kov was re-installed thrice, and finally in 1933, he was arrested and forced to sign a paper of self-accusation. In 1938, he was executed (Akayev, 2005:153-156). Most Kyrgyz leaders of the first hour underwent a similar fate (ibid.).

Among the new Kyrgyz elite were a number of Manas enthusiasts, such as Kasım Tiniştanov. Tiniştanov was a poet and a linguist, and became the first People's Commissar of the National Committee of Education (ibid.:163). He could integrate his interest in the Manas into his political work because of the fourth tier of the nationalities policy: the massive folklorisation process that was to give a harmless content to the officially acknowledged Soviet nations.

In this process, every ethnic group was labelled with its national music, national dress, national dance, national dishes and so forth. These folkloric symbols were presented at festivals, Soviet Union celebrations and at the annual International Day in schools. Pupils sang the songs and danced the dances of ethnic groups all over the world, in a celebration of the friendship of the peoples of the USSR. By putting the right of every nation for self-determination into the sphere of music, dance and language, it was hoped to remain harmless to the central state. Folklore created a sense of equality among all nations and facilitated a pleasant form of interaction between them. Even today these folklore festivals are popular in Kyrgyzstan. In the summer of 1999, for instance, I watched a Kyrgyz TV show of young children from all over the former Soviet Union who performed national dances. The Kyrgyz friend with whom I was watching the show recognised the nationality of the groups immediately as they came on stage. The dress, folk music and style of dancing were so well known during Soviet times that even while most groups had tried to put in an element of originality (pop instead of folk music or a modern version of the national dress), she had no trouble identifying the children's nationality instantly. The Manas epic occupied a special place in this process, as epics were high-status cultural elements. The Manas was very soon recognised as the cultural heritage of the Kyrgyz nation and the need to have it published was already proclaimed in 1925 by Tiniştanov. But protagonists of the epic had to play a dangerous game. The line between national self-determination and bourgeois nationalism was thin and illusive, and the Manas epic was applauded one day, but condemned the next. According to Daniel Prior, communist officials repeatedly changed their positions on Manas (Prior, 2000:21). However, he also makes clear that:

While epic poetry was a topic of discussion, it was definitely not the focus of any distinct struggle in the 1930s (ibid.:24).

The accusations and arrests of politicians in those days did not hinge upon their position towards the Manas epic. Tiniştanov's discharge from and reinstatement to the Party, for instance, was based on his alleged association with bourgeois-nationalist factions. His

statements on the Manas epic were of secondary importance. Another high official, second secretary Khasan Jienbayev, was sacked from his post, expelled from the Party and arrested, on the charge of being a nationalist – despite his criticism on a Manas text under preparation. Jienbayev wrote in a memorandum to the first secretary that the Manas text contained reflections of counterrevolutionary, bourgeois, nationalist, pan-Turkist and pan-Islamist ideologies (ibid.:25). Prior suggests that this criticism may have been an attempt by Jienbayev to deflect the charges that were brewing against him by joining the general cries of suspicion about Manas (ibid.). However this was not enough to keep him safe, which again suggests a marginal political importance of the topic of Manas. First secretary Maksim Ammosov himself proceeded to have the Manas text published, with the necessary changes. Very soon, he too was expelled from the Party and branded a bourgeois nationalist and an enemy of the people. For Prior, this decision of Ammosov to have a Manas text published portrays the intricate political meaning of the Manas during the purges. Although the Manas was a source of danger and suspicion, high officials also saw its potential as an important political tool for propaganda and education. In Prior's words:

Ammosov must have felt that a daring but correct handling of the issue of *Manas* had the potential to save his own job, if not his life. (...) But in 1937 it was nearly impossible to do anything the right way (ibid.:26).

Most of the political protagonists of the Manas were dead by 1938 (ibid.). Two years later, in the March of 1940, the Kyrgyz *sovnarkom* decreed that preparations should begin for a jubilee of Manas (ibid.:29). However it was not up to them to decide on these matters, and the central committee quickly moved to discipline the *sovnarkom* for initiating such a politically sensitive undertaking without its consent (ibid.:30). The jubilee idea subsided, but in spite of this, in 1941, the party central committee approved preparations for the 1,100-year jubilee of Manas to be held in 1947 (ibid.:31). Preparations went ahead until 1947, until an article by S. Malov appeared, criticising the idea that the Manas epic was 1,100 years old. Preparations were left to drift and the jubilee never took place (ibid.:32). Bennigsen describes the period of 1947-1950 as a campaign of the Soviet authorities against 'cosmopolitanism', including pan-Turkism, which was followed by a campaign against 'cultural nationalism' (Bennigsen, 1953:15), leading up to what he later termed the Crisis of the Turkic Epics.

In the Kyrgyz SSR, this campaign provoked a fierce discussion in the media, which culminated in a conference in 1952. At the conference, certain aspects of the Manas epic were condemned as bourgeois nationalist and pan-Islamist, but the necessity to preserve

the epic and create a complete, written tale were underlined (see chapter three, paragraph 3.2.4).

By the 1970s, censorship has become less severe and the call for the unedited publication of separate versions of Manaschiis could be voiced. The books that followed were still heavily edited versions of oral sessions, but this time the official reason was not that certain parts were ideologically incorrect, but that they were too long and repetitious. Further, a new scholarly translation into Russian was deemed of high importance for Soviet scholars for their studies of the Kyrgyz contribution to the cultural heritage of the peoples of the USSR.

Interestingly, most of the political meaning of the Manas epic during Soviet times was connected to written versions of the Manas. In the 1930s, the main concern of politicians had been to advance or hinder the publication of Manas texts. The 1952 conference also concentrated on evaluating the written texts as to their political correctness. Its outcome was a call for the publication of a socialist version of the epic in book form. In the 1970s, politically engaged writer Chingiz Aitmatov placed his effort to promote the epic into co-editing Manas publications.

But Manas performance played a role in the political arena as well. Unlike Buryat shamans (Hamayon, 1998:54), Manaschiis were no specific target for persecution during the purges. In a positive sense, they were deployed politically as symbols of Kyrgyz ethnicity and national culture. The profession of Manaschi was incorporated in the *Philharmonia* in 1935, shortly after Gorky's speech that celebrated folklore as the expression of the masses' deepest moral aspirations. Over the years, Sayakbai Karalaev and Sagimbai Orozbekov became icons of Kyrgyz culture and tradition. Their skills in oral reciting were applauded and connected to imagery of the Kyrgyz pre-revolutionary life style of illiteracy and nomadism. Manaschiis performed at all-Union festivals as representatives of the Kyrgyz ethnic group. Prestigious Soviet awards passed them by and were instead given to Manas scholars and artists who used the Manas theme in theatre and opera instead.

The Manas epic was influenced by Soviet politics in several ways. First of all, there was the large-scale advancement of written versions of the tale, which changed the relationship between the epic and the political arena. The Manas epic was accessible in fixed versions, and in this capacity it was awarded a new set of meanings that fitted the theoretical framework of the new ideology. Whereas the Manas narrator could adjust his oral performance depending on the audience he addressed, once his text was written down,

the words he had used could be incorporated into different social contexts. As such, they were brought under the scrutiny of scholars and ideologists, who assessed the tale (or a specific version) in terms of pan-Turkism, bourgeois-nationalism, clericalism and others. When these terms were abandoned, the idea that the Manas was a text that could be treated as an ideological charter remained. Secondly, the Soviet nationalities policy has made it unthinkable for Manaschīs and audiences alike that Manas was not a Kyrgyz.

### **4.3 After the Soviet Union**

The disintegration of the Soviet Union had an enormous impact on Kyrgyzstan's society. It changed the political field entirely, ethnic relations shifted drastically, the economic infrastructure collapsed and many securities of the past were gone. In this situation, ideological symbols changed meaning: they lost their value or were put into new perspectives. Although statues of Lenin were left in place, unlike in other post-socialist states where taking down communist symbols was actively pursued, the authority of these statues had diminished considerably in the eyes of most people in Kyrgyzstan. The Manas epic was one of the symbols that was taken along into the new era. It was employed by different players in the field, most conspicuously by the government who attempted to make the Manas epic the basis for a new state ideology. Another important political and ethnic symbol was language, and the language policy was an important arena in which political and ethnic relations were repositioned.

In this section, I will describe the political and ethnic context of post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan in which the Manas came to play a new public role. This new context was engaged in debates around a new set of social tension: did Kyrgyzstan belong to the Kyrgyz or to the Kyrgyzstani? Was Kyrgyzstan an ethnic state with a high number of immigrants, or was it a multi-ethnic civic state? The symbolic meanings that were attached to the Kyrgyz and Russian languages, as well as the Manas epic, reflect a number of different aspects of these debates. I will therefore delve into the language policy first, in order to draw parallels with the Manas epic later.

#### **4.3.1 The Political Arena After Independence: Ethnic and Civic Models of Statehood**

The break-up of the Soviet Union changed the political field in Kyrgyzstan considerably. Ultimate authority no longer rested in Moscow - the government of the independent Kyrgyz Republic could, and indeed had to, handle its affairs on its own. This was not an easy task, for the Soviet Union had been a vast and integrated political and economic

system. Its separate units had been organised as parts of this system, but were not equipped to stand on their own.

In the realm of economy the effects of severed ties soon became apparent: the influx of fuel and raw materials came to a halt, which hindered operation of machinery in both industry and agriculture and led to a decrease in production. The production that remained could no longer rely on the automatic outflow to other republics, because of the collapse of transportation and market systems. The republic governments no longer received funding from Moscow, which meant that pensions and civil servants' salaries were left unpaid for months on end. Further, the discontinuation of state subsidies on basic items, such as bread, caused prices to inflate drastically. Pensions and salaries that had sufficed during Soviet times were now not nearly enough to live on.

All of these effects were painfully apparent to citizens of Kyrgyzstan. When I arrived five years after independence, people still spoke of the price of bread which had risen from so many *tıyın* to so many *som*; of the number of months that people had not received their pensions; of how the agricultural machinery had fallen apart because there was no fuel or spare parts for repairs; of the quarrels between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan over the payment for gas, electricity and water and of the unemployment that had affected almost everyone. If someone claimed to work for the Bosch company, he told you he was unemployed - a pun derived from the Kyrgyz word for unemployed (*bosh*).

The end of the Soviet Union also had a major impact on the organisation of group interests. The Soviet Union had been built upon a specific solution of the tension between class and ethnic solidarity, which consisted of a federation of nations that were overarched by socialist counsels (*soviets*). After independence, socialism was abandoned, and with it the concept of class solidarity and the structure of soviets. All that was left was a set of national republics with no institutional ties between them. The inhabitants of these republics lost their connection to the overarching Soviet Union and were left to deal with the republic they lived in. The governments of the republics, on their part, were left to deal with a citizenry of which large chunks were living 'in diaspora', although they had never perceived themselves as such at the time of their migration.

In this light, the matter of dual citizenship for members of non-titular ethnic groups became a major diplomatic issue between the former Soviet Union states in the first years after the end of the Soviet Union. Inhabitants of the Kyrgyz republic who were born in Russia, for instance, were entitled to citizenship of the Kyrgyz republic as well as the Russian Federation. However, double citizenship was forbidden by the laws of both



countries. Many Russians in Kyrgyzstan still kept two passports in case they wanted to emigrate, although they knew this was illegal. Before independence, none of this had been an issue. People had been citizen (*grazhdan*) of the Soviet Union, with a separate, officially recognised ethnicity (*natsionalnost*). For most ethnic Kyrgyz, the loss of Soviet Union citizenship was no major change, neither in reality nor for their identity. Non-Kyrgyz citizens, however, suddenly felt they were ‘in diaspora’ from their ‘motherland’. As Larisa Gabarova of the Kyrgyz Committee on Citizenship explained:

In the Soviet Union, you weren’t a foreigner if you lived in another republic. You were at home. In fact we had two motherlands (*rodini*), the republic you lived in and the Soviet Union. You could study in Moscow, work in Georgia or the Baltic, but you did not feel a foreigner. There was no feeling of boundaries.

With the disappearance of the Soviet Union as a motherland, for most people it was the country that bore the name of their *natsionalnost* that filled the void, and not the republic they lived in. Decades of official internationalism had not erased deeper layers of mutual contempt between ethnic groups, and very few non-Kyrgyz were proud to be a citizen of the Kyrgyz republic. They had not identified themselves with the Kyrgyz republic, although most of them did not feel complete outsiders either. Of course, there have been exceptions, such as the famous illustrator and painter Theodor Herzen (see chapter three, paragraph 3.2.9), and a small number of Russian people that I met during my field research. Most Slavic, German and Jewish Kyrgyzstani, however, increasingly felt that they were being pushed out after independence. The loss of ties with Russia brought them a sense of being unsafe. I often heard Russians speak of suddenly being a ‘second species’ (*vtoroi sort*) in Kyrgyzstan. This comment surprised me after spending over a year among Kyrgyz<sup>129</sup>. The people I had met were predominantly positive about the Russians in their country. They expressed gratitude for the progress they had brought, and looked up to their culture and smartness. Resentment of being overshadowed culturally and economically was oriented towards the Soviet Union, but hardly ever to the Russians as an ethnic group. A conversation I had with Manaschī Talantaalī and his wife Ainura indirectly portrays this:

T: The Russians in Moscow are annoying people. They have no education (*bilimi jok*) and are arrogant.

A: The Russians that live here are a lot better, aren’t they?

T: All Central Asian Russians are good. They work hard and are educated.

---

<sup>129</sup> As I learned Russian only after my first year in Kyrgyzstan, Russian speakers came into my social and research circle only during my second and third visit.

A: The Russians that emigrated from here back to Russia were not happy there at all. You see, the Russians in Russia turned out to be very different.

Gene Huskey, a British political scientist, agrees that Kyrgyz attitudes towards the Russians were not hostile. He writes:

To the contrary, the Kyrgyz have generally exhibited respect towards Russians and Russian culture, sometimes to the point of deference (Huskey 1993:408).

Perhaps it was the attitude of many Russian towards Kyrgyz as being wild (*dikiy*) and uncivilised that made them think that now the Kyrgyz had more power, they would treat the Russians as a second species. In any case, many Russians, Ukrainians, Germans and Jews migrated to their homeland (see chapter one, paragraph 1.1.5). Annette Bohr and Simon Crisp state that:

Russian emigrants have cited the economic decline and the sharp drop in living standards as their main reasons for leaving, followed by the preferential treatment accorded to ethnic Kyrgyz, particularly in the workplace; the declaration of Kyrgyz as the state language; increasing Islamicisation; and the looming possibility of interethnic unrest (Bohr and Crisp, 1993:394).

For president Akayev, the loss of the European population was an unwelcome brain drain, and he wanted to prevent it as well as he could. To maintain a satisfactory economic level, he focussed on forging as many alliances with prosperous countries as possible. The United States and many European countries were courted, as well as Turkey, Iran, Japan, Korea and Russia. This yielded a high amount of aid and investments, and led Kyrgyzstan into the process of economic ‘shock therapy’ advanced by the IMF (see chapter one, paragraph 1.1.3).

The tensions between class and national solidarity of the early twentieth century had now turned into the tensions between ethnic and civic solidarity. There was a debate on the definition of Kyrgyzstan: was it the state of the Kyrgyz, who tolerated a high number of emigrants? Or was it a multi-ethnic state made up of a Kyrgyzstani citizenry? Both points of view were deemed legitimate by all political players, although every one placed their emphasis differently. Just as the Soviet nationalities policy had not truly solved the tensions between class and ethnic solidarity, so did my informants not truly solve the tensions between ethnic and civic models of statehood. Most of them were not even aware that they argued from different concepts at different times. An excellent example of this appeared in my interview with one of Kyrgyzstan’s most fervent non-

governmental democracy activists, Tölökan Ismailova of the Coalition NGO. During our interview, she began to explain her views on society from a civic model of statehood:

In a democratic country people need an internationalist approach. We should not look at the *natsionalnost* of citizens, they are all citizens in their own right. We have to work on devising new democratic tools now, and not look at how many Russians, Tatars or Kyrgyz we have in the White House.

But not long after she had said this, Tölökan Ismailova portrayed Kyrgyzstan as an ethnic state:

There are many differences between the inhabitants of Kyrgyzstan. Even though we all live in one country, the people from Talas are very different from the people in Narin. The Kyrgyz from Issykköl are a cheery lot, they always have to do with tourists and like to party and drink. The people from Talas call themselves children of Manas, and they are indeed very heroic. In Osh, people are much more religious and they treat women very differently. In Osh they keep their distance from the North, they call us 'the people on the other side of the mountains'.

Ismailova had no explicit way of integrating the two models, she switched abruptly from the one to the other.

Ideas on ethnic relations were thus hotly debated in the 1990s, and although people often assumed they had found conclusive solutions to the ethnic-civic tension inherent in the concept of the nation-state, they had not. Depending on the focus of the discussion, they spoke from an ethnic or a civic point of view, from a patriotic or an internationalist point of view, often unaware of the contradictions in their opinions.

President Akayev took his own position in regard to the ethnic and civic approaches of statehood. On the one hand, he employed ethnic Kyrgyz symbols such as the Manas and the Kyrgyz languages. On the other hand, Akayev steered a course of keeping the non-Kyrgyz, especially the Slavs, included in political decisions. This was symbolised in the slogan 'Kyrgyzstan - our common home' (*Kirgizstan - nash obshii dom* (R), *Kirgizstan - bızdın jalpı üyübüz* (K)). In his book published in 2003, Akayev explains what this slogan meant to him:

The national idea "Kyrgyzstan – our common home," which I proposed in 1993, summarized all of my reflections at that time. The idea was a true revelation for me. It made very clear the approach that I should take to form the new structure of the Kyrgyz government and the approach I should take to further advance the democratization of Kyrgyzstan (Akayev, 2003:221).

Western observers have interpreted this slogan as an expression of Akayev's predominantly civic approach to statehood. The slogan fell straight into the image of Kyrgyzstan as an 'island of democracy'. Anthony Hyman, for instance, describes Kyrgyzstan, in comparison to the other Central Asian states, as follows:

In contrast to Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan has the most liberal type of regime. President Askar Akayev, a former academic, differs from the other leaders in believing that in this mountainous land with a diverse population (of whom 25 per cent are Russians) capitalist reforms and a liberal political regime can rapidly create a Central Asian Switzerland where prosperity and democracy can flourish, enjoying the stability which Tajikistan lacks (Hyman, 1993:291).

In Akayev's own words, however, the slogan 'Kyrgyzstan – our common home' is not that far from ethnic ideas as Western political scientists have understood:

My understanding of the history of the Kyrgyz is that those ethnic groups that for centuries have lived in our territory sacrificed their lives in order to protect it from foreign invasions and spattered our motherland with their blood and sweat from heavy labour. Therefore, the national ideal of "Kyrgyzstan – our common home" has a special value for me. This land was our common home in the past, it remains so now, and I am confident it will forever be the same in the future (ibid.:32).

Akayev thus explains the civic-approach slogan in ethnic-approach terms. He manages to do this by using the well-tried 'imagined communities' technique of extrapolating the present-day idea of a Kyrgyz territory back into the past. Assuming that there has been a generally accepted notion of a Kyrgyz territory for centuries, Akayev speaks of ethnic groups within the territory as opposed to foreign invaders. Complex interactions, politics and warfare between various factions are reduced to the simplicity of one 'us' as it is imagined today: the Kyrgyz and the ethnic groups who settled in their territory, and one 'them': all the others with bad intentions.

The above explanation of the 'common home' slogan again leaves the clash between the ethnic and civic models unresolved. People of non-Kyrgyz ethnicity are still both included and excluded in the Kyrgyz State, they are residents of a house that is not theirs. Critics of Akayev's policies eagerly used the multi-interpretable nature of the slogan to expound their own views on interethnic relations. Member of Parliament Adatkhan Madumarov interpreted the slogan quite differently:

I think it is a bad slogan. There is some personal grudge involved here, because the slogan is originally mine. I do not complain about this, but I made the slogan up

when I worked for the television and Akayev plagiarised. Apart from this, the idea is wrong. It sounds as if we would open up the doors for everyone. It doesn't work like that in the United States, does it? Every country needs its rules for who can become a citizen. It should be seen as 'my home' (*menin üyüm*), whether you are Russian, Ukrainian, Kyrgyz, etc. This is needed to make people feel responsible for keeping Kyrgyzstan a good country to live in.

Other people found alternatives for the slogan too. When a Kyrgyz friend and I walked past a sign board with the slogan '*Kirgizstan, nash obshii dom*' in a Bishkek park, he jokingly said: '*Kirgizstan, nashoe obsheshitiye!*' ('Kyrgyzstan, our tenement'<sup>130</sup>). A Russian friend said: 'Our common home... But a house has many rooms, and the Russians received the toilet!'



Figure 4.1 'Kyrgyzstan- Our Common Home' sign board in Bishkek

The discussion on the position of ethnic groups and ethnicity in Kyrgyzstan often focussed on the language policy and the policy of designating the Manas epic as a state symbol. The practice of these policies, however, illuminates other parts of the inter-ethnic dynamics.

---

<sup>130</sup> Tenements in Kyrgyzstan provide shelter to poor families that are often ashamed to live in such a place. Large housing blocks offer bug-infested rooms, a badly equipped shared kitchen and an uncleanable toilet area.

#### 4.3.2 The language question

In the first decennia of Soviet rule, much effort was put into strengthening and promoting Kyrgyz literacy. However, in the 1930s, this policy was replaced by the advancement of an international Soviet culture in which Russian played a central role (Korth, 2005:73). By the 1980s, Kyrgyz had become subordinate to Russian in most public arenas. Many members of the Kyrgyz urban elite had forgotten ‘their own language’ and replaced it with Russian. The changes set in 1985 by the *perestroika* and *glasnost* policies led to discussions on the role of languages all over the Soviet Union. The driving force behind these changes in Kyrgyzstan had been progressive politicians and the Kyrgyz intelligentsia, amongst whom Chingiz Aitmatov (Huskey, 1995:558). The incumbent politicians were less eager to elevate the status of Kyrgyz. Their knowledge of Russian and Russian customs confirmed and strengthened their position as intercessors between the local population and distant rulers (ibid.:553). Also, the fact that most of them lacked Kyrgyz fluency made the politicians reluctant to enhance the status of Kyrgyz. According to E. Huskey, Kirgizia was the most conservative republic in the Union in the early Gorbachev years (ibid.:554) and its leaders were not interested in jeopardising the financial aid and security they received from Moscow. However, pressure from above and below forced them to give in. As Huskey says:

(f)irst secretary Masaliev and his supporters had acceded to the changes in language policy only reluctantly, pressured from above by Muscoviet reformers, acting in concert with prominent Kyrgyz allies, such as Chingiz Aitmatov, and from below by fledgling informal groups drawn from the nationalist-minded wing of the Kyrgyz intelligentsia (ibid.:558).

In 1988, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kirgizia drafted a decree called 'On the Further Development of National - Russian Bilingualism and the Improvement of Study and Teaching of Kyrgyz, Russian and other languages of the peoples of the Soviet Union in the Republic' (Huskey, 1995, Asankanov, 1997). This was a change from the former policy of “Russification” that had made no provisions for bilingualism. For the first time in decades, a programme was designed to improve teaching of not only Russian, but also Kyrgyz and other languages spoken within the Republic. The decree was still moderate for its time, though, as it only alluded to Kyrgyz becoming a state language. Furthermore, the effect of the decree was minimal, as it ended up lying untouched in the drawers of the Ministry of Education.

This lack of action prompted the progressive intelligentsia, united in a group of 21 writers, poets and scholars and headed by Chingiz Aitmatov, to write an open letter to a number of state organs, stating that the decree only existed on paper and that in reality the majority of its tasks were not being executed. The letter remarked that the Kyrgyz language needed State protection embedded in the constitution, and it warned that if the government continued to be indifferent to the problem of the Kyrgyz language, the authors of the letter would be forced to erect their own committee for protection of the mother tongue (Asankanov, 1997).

In May 1989, a committee of Kyrgyzstan's parliament began to draft a new language law (Huskey, 1995:555) that was passed in September of that year. This Law on State Language regulated the functioning of Kyrgyz in a number of public spheres. In the preamble, the new approach towards Kyrgyz was outlined. The historical value of Kyrgyz as one of the most ancient Turkic languages was stressed, the policy of the previous two decades that diminished the use of Kyrgyz was condemned and the urgent need for special measures for the protection of Kyrgyz was acknowledged. Kyrgyz was therefore given the status of State language. Russian became the 'language of interethnic communication', and languages of all other nationalities inhabiting the republic were guaranteed a 'free development'. The use of the Russian language was allowed together with the state language in all situations, without discrimination. Still, article 8 led to considerable controversy, as it required Russian-speaking managers and professionals to be able to communicate with their employees and clients in the State language (ibid.).

Instead of learning Kyrgyz, most Russians were angered and felt threatened. In protest against the law they organised mass meetings, collected petitions and wrote letters to newspapers (ibid.:556). Once the law was passed, however, a number of non-Kyrgyz speaking officials began to learn Kyrgyz. Damira Sidikova, head of the Kyrgyz department of the International University, told me that she taught Kyrgyz in the parliament (*Jogorku Kengesh*) not long after the language law had passed. Her students, government officials and other important public figures, enjoyed her classes very much. She said:

I taught Kyrgyz to government officials in a programme offered by the National University. We had a really fancy classroom at the old square, and we created a really nice atmosphere there. We would bring tea and Kyrgyz delicacies and in that way we put Kyrgyz language and culture in a positive light. The officials told me they were looking forward to our weekly class. They made a lot of progress. But all of that has disappeared now. As soon as Russian became an 'official language'

everyone realised the language policy was not going to be as strict as it was in for instance the Baltic States. They quit the courses and forgot most of what they learnt.

With the exception of these pleasant encounters, the language law instilled fear in many Russians. This closely correlates with the sentiments that Terry Martin found in response to the indigenisation (*korenizatsia*) policies of the 1920s and 1930s. Russians were deeply frightened by these policies, designed to counter Great-Russian chauvinism and emancipate the ‘culturally backward’ peoples of the Soviet Union. *Korenizatsia* comprised of a privileged position for members of the titular nation to be employed in governmental functions and of the introduction of the national language in public spheres. Many Russians found it hard to find employment in the Central Asian republics and saw *korenizatsia* as the main cause (Martin, 2001:137). In 1928, a group of Russian workers living in the Uzbek SSR wrote a letter to the Central Asian Bureau, stating:

In every republic “their letters” and “their language” are being introduced... so the questions arises: “where will the Russians go? Where will Russians work?” ... with the implementation of *Uzbekization* in our institutions, there is no question that all Russians will be replaced with Uzbeks – that is a fact (ibid.:138).

In a similar way, the language law of 1989 contributed to the Russians’ feelings of being unwelcome in Kyrgyzstan. The reinforcement of the language policy in the constitution of the independent Kyrgyz Republic in 1993 sparked a new wave of protests and complaints. But what was the reality of language politics and language choice in Kyrgyzstan in the late 1990s?

The 1989 law had been optimistic: it designed a transitional period of nine-and-a-half years (1989-1998), where Russian and other languages could be used next to the state language. Only on 1 January 1999, the State language should have been in full operation. In 1999, however, Russian still held an important position and Kyrgyz had advanced only slightly.

In government settings, Kyrgyz was spoken more often than before and it had an important symbolic function in official celebrations. However, Russian still held the dominant place in state institutions. Nearly all documentation was in Russian, and although letter headings were both in Russian and Kyrgyz, the actual text was in most cases in Russian. Documents that were used in parliament were both in Kyrgyz and Russian, but Members of Parliament told me that only the Russian parts were read and used in discussions. Many MPs spoke Kyrgyz during sessions, but MPs from non-Kyrgyz ethnic



groups never did. Many Kyrgyz MPs switched between Russian and Kyrgyz, often even within a sentence. Incidentally, this code-switching was quite common among Kyrgyz speakers during my fieldwork. Documents to be filled in by citizens were again mostly in Russian, as were the information signs and posters on the walls. However, there was geographic variation in this situation. In villages in Naryn, where 98% of the population is Kyrgyz, most documentation was written in Kyrgyz, whereas in Karakol, the Issykköl region centre that has many Russian inhabitants and where many Kyrgyz speak good Russian, Russian dominated the administrative scene. In Bishkek, the country's capital, the symbolic function of Kyrgyz played a larger role and here, slogans and information signs were both in Kyrgyz and Russian.

Government newspapers had separate editions in Kyrgyz and Russian (c.f. *Erkin Too* (Kyrgyz) and *Svobodnie Gory* (Russian)). Opposition papers, on the other hand, were either in Russian or in Kyrgyz (c.f. *Asaba* (K), *Vecherniy Bishkek* (R)). The exception was the opposition paper ResPublica, which had an edition in both languages. In an interview in 1998 with a female journalist from this paper, she reveals some of the sociolinguistic patterns that steered the course of the newspapers:

ResPublica is an opposition paper, that is the main goal. There is no censorship like on the radio, but we do have problems with MPs who sue us for slander. Right now there is a claim of 80.000 som against us. There is a Kyrgyz and a Russian edition of ResPublica every week. These are not identical. The most important political articles are the same, but for the rest there is a Kyrgyz and a Russian editorial staff that both write their own articles. The Russian editorial staff are almost all Kyrgyz, but they are Kyrgyz who always speak Russian. They are much stronger than the Kyrgyz editorial staff where I work. They write a lot more about politics. We write about traditions (*salt*) and those things. There is no policy to do this, it is just that the journalists are different. We all have our own interests and we follow them. But the Russian edition is sold a lot more. Most Kyrgyz who want to read a Kyrgyz paper buy Asaba. And Kyrgyz intellectuals are used to reading Russian. ResPublica is a real town's paper. We write mostly about Bishkek, but Asaba has correspondents in every oblast.

Not long after this interview, the Kyrgyz edition of the newspaper was reduced to an inlay in the Russian edition.

In the sphere of education, the language policy did achieve some successes. From 1989 onwards, all children in the republic received Kyrgyz language training, whether they

studied at Kyrgyz, Russian, mixed or Uzbek schools. At university level Kyrgyz classes were obligatory as well. The quality of these classes depended on the schools and individual teachers. In general, people stated that Kyrgyz classes for non-Kyrgyz speaking pupils at school were very poor. The lack of teaching materials was always mentioned as the main obstacle, and some people recognised the lack of motivation due to an absent necessity to speak Kyrgyz in daily life. Most Kyrgyz classes for non-Kyrgyz speakers that I observed did not exceed the level of teaching passive knowledge of a foreign language. One would not think that this was a language that the students heard and saw around them on a daily basis.

The following description of a Kyrgyz language exam for Russian students shows a number of things: first of all, it makes clear how little interest the Russian students had in learning proper Kyrgyz. Secondly, it shows that although the teachers worked hard to assert their authority, in the end their grading did not match their stern words.

In March 1999, Talantaali invited me to observe oral Kyrgyz exams for Russian-speaking students at the American University in Kyrgyzstan. For these exams, the students faced four stern-looking teachers sitting in a row behind the table, who treated them with disdain. A student who was asked to translate the word *zhenzhina* (woman), and came up with the word *kiz* (girl). He managed to give a few correct answers, but failed when he was asked to conjugate the verb to work (*ishtoo*). Other students performed equally bad. Talantaali became increasingly angry, a female teacher started to laugh. All teachers shook their heads regularly, saying ‘*uyat, uyat, uyat*’ (shame, shame, shame). The ray of hope that day was the Kyrgyz poem that was recited by a female student. Finally something went well. Still, the student was interrupted by a teacher who told her to work on her pronunciation. The student asked if she should continue but was told not to bother. Later on, however, I heard her exclaim to her fellow students that she had received the highest grade possible; a five. The teachers’ decisions on the grades depended more on the attitude of the students than on their actual knowledge of the language, as that was abysmal for all students. One girl who failed to answer almost all questions was judged to have shown no effort (*araket jok*). Talantaali said to the teachers: ‘This is one of the girls who said that they do not need Kyrgyz!’, and then, looking at the girl, he asked: ‘So, do you need it now?’ The girl, who knew very well that she needed the grade to move over to the next year, nodded yes. She left without a grade and was told to do the exam again later.

Another class at the same university, however, had acquired a surprising high level of Kyrgyz proficiency. This class was taught by my own Kyrgyz teacher, Dinara Alimova. She was a highly skilled and invigorating teacher and had managed to capture the students' interest. Also, an occasional secondary school achieved good results in Kyrgyz teaching. I visited school number 61 in Bishkek, a Russian-language '*Fizika-Matematika Litsei*' with special government attention. For their Kyrgyz language and literature classes they had managed to get a hold of the SOROS-funded quality Kyrgyz textbook. Talantaalī and I were invited to observe an open class where the pupils presented what they had learnt during the last semester. The pupils, aged 14 and 15, expressed a remarkable knowledge of Kyrgyz. A few Russian boys even recited the *Manas*, to the amusement of Talantaalī and the Kyrgyz teachers who had joined us.

A presidential decree issued in June 1994 had a strong impact on both the perception and practice of the proposed language shift. In the light of mass emigration of the Slavic population, president Akayev issued a decree to remove the sharp edges of the language policy, recognising Russian as an official language in those entities which consist in the majority of Russian speakers (Korth 2005:118). This decree was the first step towards a law passed in 2000 that recognised Russian as the official language in all spheres of public life (ibid.:120).

On May 24, 2000, I was present at the parliamentary session where this law was finalised. An immediate change in language use was apparent: Russian began to dominate the meeting. Also parliamentarians such as Adatkhan Madumarov who had been persistent in using Kyrgyz at all meetings suddenly spoke Russian. At some point, even the Speaker of the parliament spoke in Russian. Only a few weeks ago he had explained to me that as a Speaker, he was obliged to speak Kyrgyz.

The re-introduction of Russian as an official language, then, was a set-back for the use of Kyrgyz, which had been progressing only slowly. In addition to this, the economic crisis severely limited the resources that could be mustered for the law's implementation. Furthermore, many state institutions were mere empty shells where hardly any work was done. The State Language Centre, installed in the beginning of 1999 fitted, as far as I could see, straight into this category. When I arrived at the office of the Centre for an interview with the head of the dictionary department, the entire staff was in the midst of some celebration: a tea table was set up with a multitude of salads, biscuits, bread and meat. I was not invited to the table, as I had become accustomed to, but hastily brought to the director's office. The interview that followed had the atmosphere of an examination and

the director seemed relieved when it was over. He did not pass the 'exam', as he did not know basic facts on the language policy and he failed to explain the actual tasks of the Centre. For example, the director claimed that the Centre had a coordinating function in the implementation of the language policy. But when I asked about language education, he told me that this was the task of the Ministry of Education and therefore he did not know anything about it. I cannot rule out the possibility that his ignorant attitude was a smoke screen to convey as little information as possible (see introduction). In my assessment, however, the Centre was an institute where no work was done.

The tensions between ideas of ethnic statehood and civic statehood, with the background of an undesired non-Kyrgyz brain drain, undermined the effectiveness of the Law on State Language. These tensions prevented a single focus and determination on the part of the president, government institutions and many citizens of Kyrgyzstan to turn Kyrgyz into the primary or dominant language. In combination with a weak government and low funding, the language policy that was meant to elevate the status of Kyrgyz did not even come close to achieving its initial goals.

#### 4.3.3 The Manas Epic and Ethnic and Civic Models of Statehood

##### 4.3.3.1 The Manas Epic since Independence: a Kyrgyz hero of a Kyrgyz epic

Before we examine the position of the Manas epic in the political and ethnic arena, it is important to note that at the time of Kyrgyzstan's independence, the Manas was univocally seen as a Kyrgyz national epic about a Kyrgyz national hero. Although Manas was not explicitly, and most likely not at all, a Kyrgyz in the nineteenth-century versions, by the 1990s there was no discussion in Kyrgyzstan about the ethnicity of Manas and the ownership of the epic. Manas was a Kyrgyz, the epic Kyrgyz national heritage, the tale an encyclopaedia of the Kyrgyz ancient life style, and the singers of the Manas were keepers of a Kyrgyz tradition. At the time of my fieldwork, this idea was sustained by virtually all players in the field, Manaschis, scholars, politicians, school teachers, town people and villagers alike.

The proceedings of the Manas conference of the 1995 'Manas 1,000' festival show quite clearly how Manas' ethnicity is nowadays no longer a matter of debate. None of the 67 paper abstracts takes the ethnic origins of Manas or the epic as a point for discussion. Rather, the scholars from various countries wrote the following statements.

‘Manas embodies the progressive idea of unification of all the Kyrgyz tribes under the aegis of a courageous and just leader. In the person of Manas, the people found such an ideal leader, who could be the head of all the Kyrgyz tribes’ (Koichuev et.al., 1995:4).

‘The sources of the epic are buried deep in history, and are related to the heroic past of the ancient Kyrgyz when they lived at the Enisei River, then on the Altai and in Eastern Turkestan’ (ibid.:14).

‘The epos evolves from the ancient Kyrgyz as well as the Eastern Turkic tribes’ ancestors who in the course of time were assimilated into the structure of the Kyrgyz tribes’ (ibid.:23).

‘In ‘The Great March’ the Kyrgyz, led by the hero Manas, march together with Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Uighurs and others against the Chinese invaders to Be’ejin’ (ibid.:25).

‘Without exaggeration we say that the ‘Manas’ epic is an historical source for the study of Kyrgyz political relations since ancient times’ (ibid.:32).

‘The period in which ‘Manas’ evolved as a great work of art coincided with the supremacy of the ancient Kyrgyz state in the territory of present-day Tuva. (...) It can be assumed that even before this period, the Kyrgyz had already had a basis for the production of manuscripts and books, and that some chapters of ‘Manas’ had been written down’ (ibid.:33).

‘‘Manas’ was created by the Kyrgyz of Central Asia while surrounded by Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Kalmyks and others. (...) ‘Manas’ is not the sole epos in Central Asia of this broad genre. The Uzbeks have ‘Alpamysh’, the Kazakhs have ‘Alpamys’, and the Tatars have a similar name as well’ (ibid.:58).

‘The “Manas” epos represents the Kyrgyz people’s memory of an heroic epoch. The “Manas” epos is an almost limitless window on the Kyrgyz people’s mentality. (...) The “Manas” epos is a source of inspiration from which the Kyrgyz people of today can draw the spiritual energy necessary to struggle to preserve their Motherland’ (ibid.:84,85).

‘Being heads of the Kyrgyz tribes and kins, Bakai and Manas, paying no attention to Koketei’s testament, decide to celebrate the funeral repast as if this ceremony had never been performed’ (ibid.:87).

President Akayev also takes it for granted that Manas was Kyrgyz. In his book *Kyrgyz Statehood and the National Epos “Manas”*, there is no discussion as to whether Manas and the epic are Kyrgyz or not. Akayev does not refer explicitly to Manas as a Kyrgyz, but he

also does not doubt it. He consistently refers to the Manas as a ‘national epos’, and gives the epic credit for having inspired Kyrgyz national consciousness:

Our national epos connects the succession of generations of Kyrgyz with its high moral principles and ethical standards, which have become the flesh and blood of the Kyrgyz. (...) Heroism and nobleness – two great features of the Kyrgyz national character born out of the difficult conditions of our history – have continued to develop and have received powerful reinforcement by the epos *Manas*, which truly has a spiritual influence on the national consciousness of the Kyrgyz (Akayev, 2003:12).

It was not only politicians who needed the Manas for their rhetoric, or scholars who linked onto the political tide that saw Manas as Kyrgyz. The Manaschīs I met during fieldwork also deemed it beyond dispute that the Manas epic was Kyrgyz. The topic came up when Talantaalī Bakchiev told me about the 1952 Manas conference.

I: Was this also when it was decided that Manas was a Kyrgyz epic?

Talant: Yes. Before that there were indeed some Kazakhs and other peoples who said that the epic was also theirs. Mukhtar Auezov made it clear that it was a Kyrgyz epic. I: Why did he do that? He is a Kazakh himself!

Talant: I don’t know. Based on the facts, I suppose. Because it is in fact a Kyrgyz epic. All the great Manaschīs like Sayakbai and Sagımbai are Kyrgyz.

In 2000, Talantaalī presented a paper at a conference in the Netherlands that dealt with the mysticism of Manas recital. In this paper it is clear that Talantaalī sees the Manas as a Kyrgyz epic. In the English abstract of the paper we read:

For many years, scholars have ignored the mysticism at the source of the Kyrgyz Manas epic, considering it imaginary. (...) For the Kyrgyz people, to be gifted with the skill to narrate the Manas epic was something very special. (...) According to folk beliefs, only a Kyrgyz person who was selected by the Spirit of Manas could become a narrator (Bakchiev, 2000).

Not only the epic is Kyrgyz for Talantaalī, Manas himself was also a Kyrgyz. He never stated this explicitly in our conversations, it was so obvious for him that it simply was no item of discussion. In his self-published booklet *Almambet’s Tale* (*Almambettin Jomogu*) there are references to Manas’ ethnicity. We read, for instance:

<i>Bul Manastan kıl battap</i>	I will isolate myself from this Manas
<i>keteyin degen ekensing.</i>	And leave, you said
<i>Bul Kirgizdi kitattap</i>	I will enumerate the ancestors of this Kyrgyz
<i>tekteyin degen ekensing</i>	and slander him, you said (Bakchiev, 1995:18).

Talantaali became explicit about Manas being a Kyrgyz when I showed him a copy of *The Manas of Wilhelm Radloff* by Arthur Hatto. I asked Talantaali why Manas was a Nogoi in the nineteenth-century versions, and why the narrator was so negative about the Kyrgyz. Talantaali could not believe that Manas was actually portrayed as a non-Kyrgyz and announced that Hatto's translation was wrong. As for the negative image of the Kyrgyz, Talantaali explained that this was part of the typical Kyrgyz sense of self-mockery. When I asked Kaba Atabekov the same question, he explained that there was a misunderstanding: Manas was a Kyrgyz from the Kipchak clan, and 'Nogoi' was the name of his grandfather. This idea was echoed by an old man I met in a village near Osh, who also claimed that Manas' *ulut* (ethnicity) was Kyrgyz, and his grandfather's name was Nogoi. In March 2007, I asked Talantaali his view on the matter over email. Once again, his position stood far removed from that of Hatto:

I: Of which ethnicity (*ulut*) was<sup>131</sup> Manas himself? Do all Manaschis say the same, or does one say this, the other that?

T: Manas was Kyrgyz, that is said in all versions. His tribe (*uruu*) was Nogoi. Sometimes they say Sari Nogoi. Presently, there is no Nogoi tribe in Kyrgyzstan. That should be investigated.

The Manaschi Jumanali Nasirov, portrayed by Thomas Voorter in his graduate paper 'Kyrgyz Heroes', also has something to say about Manas' ethnicity. His words echo the official stance on Manas:

The *sanjira* [genealogy] of Manas is the *sanjira* of the Kyrgyz. Manas was a Kyrgyz. He was a great khan who lived thousand years ago. He united all the Kyrgyz lineages. Under his leadership the country was flourishing. The Kyrgyz families start with Manas... (Voorter, 1999:77).

---

<sup>131</sup> In Kyrgyz, the verb can be left out; hence we did not need to choose between the present and past tense. The past tense stresses the historical value of Manas, whereas the present tense leaves room for his spirit being alive and interactive to this day.

#### 4.3.3.2 The Manas Epic in the Hands of the Government

The use of the Manas as a political symbol underwent a similar development as the language policy: it was championed by Kyrgyz intellectuals, during Perestroika it became officially recognised, after independence it was propagated with a lot of fanfare, only to whither away from political life in the late 1990s.

In the 1970s, the Manas epic had been republished, and in its foreword, Chingiz Aitmatov had already used rhetoric that became commonplace in the later *perestroika* years (see chapter 3, paragraph 3.2.6). With independence, the Manas epic was taken up by the Kyrgyz government which was looking for new symbols to represent the republic. Lenin had lost his representation power – although, unlike in some other former-Soviet Republics, there had been no iconoclasm of his portraits. The imposing statue of Lenin on the main square of Bishkek was left untouched, and was not moved to a less important park until 2003. Along roadsides and in many public buildings all over the country statues and silhouettes of Lenin were to be seen, and no-one seemed to take offence. Still, the Communist Party had been banned as communism was left behind as a state ideology, and the government could not (and did not want to) use the old symbols anymore. A new set of symbols was needed. As in all other ex-Soviet republics, elements from the culture of the titular group were the obvious reservoir to tap in to for this purpose. Kyrgyzstan was lucky to have an epic in this reservoir, as epics had become national symbols par excellence. A nation with an epic was a nation that had evolved far enough to have a viable independent life.

In the 1990s, the Manas epic was regarded as a reflection of the ancient unity of the Kyrgyz by many Kyrgyz scholars, who awarded the epic a role in its construction. The sociologist Abilabek Asankanov, for instance, claimed that:

Kirghizia formed as an ethnically, economically and linguistically linked community in the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. (...) The epos 'Manas', being encyclopedic in content, is a monument to the spiritual culture of our people. It concentrates the ideas of integrity and unity among the Kyrgyz. In past years it played a significant role in consolidating the Kyrgyz tribes into an ethnic community. (...) the central hero Manas, who managed to unite uncoordinated Kyrgyz tribes and give them back their primordial family territories, clearly leads to the idea of ethnic self-consciousness (Asankanov in Koichuev et.al., 1995:27).

Also, N.V. Kumsikova argues that the Manas epic was vital in consolidating the Kyrgyz as an ethnic group:



Kyrgyz people have unique epic creations which have reached our days owing to the poetic talent of epic singers (akyns and manaschis). These singers preserved and brought to us folk tales and legends, and created epic traditions and epic styles that encouraged the originality and peculiarity of the Kyrgyz national culture.(...) The image of Manas is sacred for every Kyrgyz (Kumskova in Koichuev et.al., 1995:91).

The Ukrainian scholar Stepanyuk has a similar approach:

I had heard about Manas from the first days of my residing in Kyrgyzstan. (...) Each nation has its own Manas, its own prophet, hero, or batyr in whose name history itself is living, as is the existence of the people as a nation. Manas is precisely this, and points the way to an independent motherland (Stepanyuk in Koichuev et.al., 1995:64)

The choice for the Manas, then, was easily made.

The political motives for organising a celebration of the anniversary of the Manas epic is spelled out clearly in political documents on the 1995 'Manas 1,000' festival. The presidential decree that initiated the jubilee is explicit about the political meaning of the Manas epic:

Today when Kyrgyzstan is on its own way of development, the epos Manas became the symbol of unity and spiritual revival of the Kyrgyz nation, its culture, national dignity and self-consciousness. Considering the 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the epos *Manas* as an important political event in the modern history of the sovereign state of Kyrgyzstan, I issue Decree: (...) (Akayev in Asankanov, 1995:no page number).

The General Assembly of UNESCO stated a similar position in the resolution on the celebration of the 'Manas 1,000' festival. They too present the Manas epic as Kyrgyz national heritage, but put a greater stress on its international significance:

The General Assembly, taking into account that 1995 is the millennium of the Kyrgyz national epos *Manas* (...)

Taking into consideration that the *Manas* epos is a vitally important connecting link that supports and unites the peoples of the Middle Asia region all along their centuries old history.

Admitting that this epos is not only the source of Kyrgyz language and literature but also the basis of cultural, moral, historical, social and religious traditions of the Kyrgyz people. (...)

Remembering that celebration of the millennium of the *Manas* epos may greatly enrich the cultural and international collaboration and mutual understanding (...) (UN resolution in Asankanov, 1995:no page number).

If we look at these resolutions from the perspective of the ethnic and civic approaches to statehood, we find that UNESCO's position differs from president Akayev's. Where Akayev speaks of the *Manas* as a symbol of the Kyrgyz nation, UNESCO links it to all peoples of Middle Asia. For Akayev, the celebration is an important event in the history of the sovereign state of Kyrgyzstan, UNESCO sees its significance in enriching international collaboration. Thus, in his decree, Akayev speaks from an ethnic approach, whereas UNESCO puts greater stress on the civic approach.

Akayev's stress on the ethnic value of the *Manas* comes back in his book *Kyrgyz Statehood and the National Epos "Manas"*, published two years before his downfall in 2005. In this book, he portrays Kyrgyz national consciousness as that of an ancient nation that survived ages of attacks on its integrity:

The idea of national statehood, flaming brightly during the ninth century but somewhat faded in later years, has nevertheless survived the centuries with its original integrity intact. On August 31, 1991, in an event of great historical value, the independent state of the Kyrgyz Republic was created as an equal member of the world community. This event was the fulfilment of a great dream kept alive by the Kyrgyz people for twenty-two centuries (ibid.).

He introduces the *Manas* as a spiritual basis for this national consciousness:

The ancient heritage of our ancestors consist of certain components. (...)

**A material basis** – our fertile blessed land;

**An ideological basis** – the idea of statehood carried with integrity through the centuries. Similar to the North Star for northern seafarers, it has served as a bright guiding light for the Kyrgyz;

**A spiritual basis** – our national epos *Manas* is a great force uniting people. *Manas* is a passionate appeal to national greatness, for it shows that in the name of a people it is necessary to go to battle disregarding one's own life (ibid.:13).

The form into which the government moulded the epic to make it work effectively as a spiritual basis was a set of seven principles (*Manastin Jeti Osuyati*)<sup>132</sup>. President Askar

---

<sup>132</sup> In Akayev's 2003 book *Kyrgyz Statehood and the national Epos "Manas"*, the word *osuyat* is translated as 'lesson' and as 'testament'. During my fieldwork, the usual English translation of *Jeti Osuyati* was Seven Principles.

Akayev, the acclaimed author of the principles, presented the Seven Principles at the ‘Manas 1,000’ celebrations in 1995. For Akayev, the Manas is suitable for a state ideology, as:

it is easy to see that for ancient Kyrgyz people and tribes the epos was a prototype for the national Constitution, a code of laws and moral decrees, a code of honour and morals, a will for future Kyrgyz generations (ibid.:282).

In 1997, a publication on the Seven Principles was in Kyrgyz, Russian and English editions<sup>133</sup>.

In a small note on page two we read that the book was published for schoolchildren, teachers and students, but that it can also be used by ‘other interested people, amongst whom politicians’. The author is Bektur Isakov, the author of a Soviet-time methodology on Manas teaching in 1981 (MEI:244). The book describes each principle by a quote from the Manas, followed by a quote from president Akayev, and then an elaborate explanation by Isakov, who refers frequently to the written versions of Sayakbai Karalayev and Sagımbai Orozbekov.

Literally translated, the Seven Principles are as follows<sup>134</sup>:

- 1 The undividable unity of all the people, its head in one collar, its arm in one sleeve.
- 2 Accord, friendship and cooperation between nationalities.
- 3 Ethnic pride and clear conscience.
- 4 Through relentless work and advanced industry and science, well-being and prosperity are aspired.
- 5 Humanism, nobility and forgiveness.
- 6 Having a sweet relation with nature.
- 7 Strengthening the Kyrgyz government and guarding her like an eye’s pupil.

What stands out is the stress on ethnicity and patriotism in the principles: five of them describe distinct nationalist attitudes. The Seven Principles turn the Manas epic into a

---

<sup>133</sup> Unfortunately, I have only managed to obtain a copy in Kyrgyz. A comparison in style and contents is thus missing.

<sup>134</sup> In Kyrgyz:

- 1 *El-jurtun ajıragıs bütündügü jana bir jakadan bash, bir jenden kol chıgargan birimdigi.*
- 2 *Ulut aralık intımak, dostuk jana kızımtashtık.*
- 3 *Ulutuk ar-namıs jana atuulduk ariet*
- 4 *Aribas meenet, aldıngkı önör-bilim arkıluu bakıbat döölöktö umtuluu.*
- 5 *Gumanizm, aıköldük, kechirimdüülük.*
- 6 *Tabiyat mene tattuu mamilede boluu.*
- 7 *Kırğız mamlekettigin chıngdoo jana anı közdün karegindei saktuu.*

blueprint for a Kyrgyz government with a strongly united and proud people, who live in friendship with other peoples, work hard and care for nature. The principles are obviously politically motivated and are made to fit the interests of the government. The spearheads of the government are illustrated with quotes from the Manas, but the numerous stories of war and violence, exuberant feasting and the supernatural are passed over. The epic was not conceived as a political document, and has many aspects of true life that a politician would avoid to mention.

The hostile attitude towards the Chinese is an example of elements of the Manas that could work counterproductively in the political arena. In the 1950s, during the ‘crisis of the Turkic epics’, hostility towards the Chinese had to be downplayed to keep the Manas politically safe (see chapter 3, paragraph 3.2.4). In the early days of Kyrgyzstan’s independence, this had not changed. Security issues were uncertain, and friendly ties with China were imperative. Border disputes that had lingered during the Soviet period were resolved as soon and as peacefully as possible. Promoting a negative attitude towards the Chinese was thus not in the governments interest. Obviously, ‘Defying the Chinese’ was not one of the Seven Principles. In fact, president Akayev went at great lengths to render this delicate issue harmless. In his 2003 book, Akayev first denies that the Chinese were ever enemies of the Kyrgyz. In the chapter *China and the Kyrgyz in Historical Retrospection*, he writes:

Throughout the centuries, the Kyrgyz and the Chinese were never at war, nor did they threaten each other with force (Akayev, 2003:235).

Akayev uses the term Great Campaign (a term rarely used outside the context of the Manas) to describe a historic coalition between the Chinese and the Kyrgyz to crush the Uighurs (ibid.:239). This looks like an attempt to neutralise the term ‘Great Campaign’ and conceal its generally accepted meaning. Later on in the book, Akayev acknowledges that the Chinese are the enemy in Manas’ Great Campaign. However, he has an extremely pleasant explanation for this:

(...) why does the epos mention the Chinese as an enemy of Manas when the Kyrgyz people had never been in a war with the Chinese and had never planned one? “The Great Campaign” to Beijing could only exist in the imaginary world. However, the choice of the imaginary enemy is understandable. A great epic hero like Manas should have a great opponent, whose strength is equal to the great legendary strength of Manas. From the point of view of a Manas storyteller, only China could be an appropriate opponent. Another factor that could contribute to the

choice of China as an enemy is that the name of the Uighur's capital at that time, Beitin, phonetically resembles the name of the Chinese capital – Peking (Beijing). In ancient times when the art of Manas storytellers was not restricted by political and ideological limitations, their creative imaginations could stretch all the way to the heart of China and its capital (ibid.:279).

By 2003, president Akayev hardly mentions the Seven Principles anymore. In his book *Kyrgyz Statehood and the National Epos "Manas"*, he mentions them only briefly:

"The Seven Testaments of Manas" for the Kyrgyz are considered to be the most respected ethical and moral standards (ibid.:46).

This remark stands alone in the chapter, and the reader is not informed as to what these Testaments entail or where they came from. In a later chapter Akayev does explain the origin of the Principles (now called 'lessons') and discusses them one by one, but here too, they are not integrated into the rest of the text (ibid.:282). In the addresses to the Parliament and foreign institutions that are included in the book, the Principles are absent altogether. This seems to suggest that over the years, the principles did not prove to be a successful stepping stone for the president to convey his political messages – at least not for a national and international political audience. The slogan 'Kyrgyzstan – our Common Home' receives much more attention in his book. This slogan is not in conflict with the Seven Principles; in fact, the Principles convey the same plea for integration of the ethnic and civic approaches to statehood. However, their connection to the Manas automatically implies an ethnic and even nationalistic approach.

Secondly, the association of the Manas epic with the traditional, culturally backward and non-modern spheres may have played a role in Akayev's loss of interest in the Manas. Although for some of my informants the Manas had surpassed this stigma, for many others it still conjured up images of ancient mountain dwellers rather than modern Kyrgyzstani who play an important role in the international field. Probably for this reason, the Seven Principles are also hardly mentioned in the colourful coffee table book *Askar Akaev, the First President of the Kyrgyz Republic* (Rud, 1999). This book was published in 1999 in Turkey. It was prepared by the press-service of the Kyrgyz president and paid for by the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The texts that accompany the photographs are in three languages: Turkish, English and Russian. Interestingly, Kyrgyz is not among them. The book radiates an atmosphere of progress and modernity, with pictures of hydroelectric plants, computer technologists, international leaders and fancy sailing boats on Lake İssikköl. On the other hand, the Turkic background of the president and his country is

stressed in the description of Akayev's childhood years, the use of the word *Kurultai* for congresses, pictures of international leaders who have been given Kyrgyz robes (*chapan*) and hats (*kalpak*) and pictures of children dancing in traditional clothes. The Manas is mentioned only once and briefly in the Culture section, in combination with an implicit reference to Akayev's Seven Principles:

Over the past 7 years Kyrgyzstan managed to preserve and to increase the spiritual potential created by previous generations. The strategic line aimed at entry of Kyrgyzstan into the world community – as a unique ethnic and cultural segment of humankind – evolving along its own way of development has been determined.  
(...)

In this context the commemoration of the thousandth anniversary of the heroic epos “Manas” was held in Kyrgyzstan in August of 1995. The founding principles vested in the immortal epic coincided with the ideals of today's democratic changes (Rud, 1999:169).

The idea of ‘Kyrgyzstan – our Common Home’, in contrast, received an entire chapter. The chapter starts with an ethnic approach by introducing the Kyrgyz as ‘one of the most ancient peoples on the Asian continent’ (ibid.:57). The history of the Kyrgyz is elaborated upon in a few sections. Then the civic point of view is introduced:

The people of Kyrgyzstan represent an alloy of peoples linked by the historical destiny of the Kyrgyzs, Russians, Uzbeks, Ukrainians, Kazakhs, Germans, Byelorussians, Tajiks, Jews, Koreans, Uygurs and people of dozens of other nationalities (ibid.:61).

When the slogan ‘Kyrgyzstan - our Common Home’ is explained, we find an interesting integration of The Seven Principles and the Common Home idea:

Since the days of independent development, Kyrgyzstan has been implementing a programmed national policy. To ensure the international peace and balance, the following 5 principles have been laid out as a basis for the government policy: the tolerance, good will, respect for the rights of every ethnic group, concord, and cooperation. The favourable environment enabling every ethnic group to preserve its language and culture and to identify itself as part of one country has been ensured. All of this can be expressed in the formula “Kyrgyzstan is our common home” (ibid.:62-63).

The Principles have been reduced to five, but more importantly, they are presented unlinked to the Manas epic. This is odd, because the Manas has played an important

symbolic role in the relations between Turkey and Kyrgyzstan. When the Soviet Union fell apart, Turkey sought to build on the Turkic background of the Central Asian successor states in order to expand its area of influence. The Manas epic was a favourite item used in the glorification of Turkic culture and the confirmation of ancient ties between the countries. The Manas was quickly translated into Turkish and the Turkish university in Kyrgyzstan was named Manas University. The choice to stash away the Manas in this book was probably a conscious one, perhaps to the higher glory of Kyrgyzstan's modernity.

At the end of the 1990s, the Manas faded out of political life in Kyrgyzstan. Perhaps the fate of the 'Ethnographic-cultural Complex *Manas Aiil*' illustrates the course of the political interest in the Manas well. *Manas Aiil* is a park in Bishkek made up of architectural structures that were built for the 1995 festivities. In 1997, I went there on invitation to a picnic by the class of a befriended American teacher. We sat on crumbling stone walls without any colour or vegetation. The students told us that the place was mostly used for taking wedding pictures and videos, and while we were there we saw a few couples posing in front of the white structures. On my return to the place in 2000, the park had become even bleaker than in 1997, as it had been badly-kept and was hardly visited anymore.



Figure 4.2 Ethnographic-cultural Complex *Manas Aiil* in 1997

The decline in public interest for new forms of the Manas was apparent everywhere. Slowly, the 'Manas 1,000' logos disappeared from the kiosks and street banners. The Manas Propaganda Agency was disbanded and not replaced. The number of Manas-related festivals declined and the investment in Manas-related publications ceased. The Manas was disposed of as a state symbol. Caroline Humphrey recognises this process as inherent in political symbolisms. She argues that:

practices of the political imagination also 'have their time', as it were. There is a period when they have currency and are widely popular, while later they may become somewhat stale and suspect of trickery; later still they become the subject of jokes, and finally they may be replaced by other ideas (Humphrey 2002:260).

The short life-span of the otherwise powerful symbol of Manas after independence points at a flaw in the applicability. There must have been something fundamentally missing in the connection of Manas with the course for independent Kyrgyzstan that accelerated the exit of the Manas epic out of the political arena. The main reason seems to be that the ethnic approach of statehood that the Manas represented was not pursued. The Manas was too 'nationalistic' to be taken to heart by the non-Kyrgyz population. Efforts to point at the civic and internationalist orientation of the Manas were fruitless, as the Soviet imagery of the Manas as Kyrgyz folklore had become too deeply ingrained. Just as the language policy swayed back to maintaining the position of Russian, the Manas was abandoned as a useful political tool.

#### 4.3.3.3 The Manas Epic and its Political Significance to the Audience

When I discussed the Seven Principles in Kazıbek, I heard nothing but assent with the principles. My translator, for example, pointed out that the seven principles were used to teach the schoolchildren good behaviour. When I asked her about the violence in the epic, she answered:

The violence is there because of the enemies. Enemies will always be there in life. Manas brought our tribes together, and that is very important for us. We must always be prepared to defend ourselves against our enemies.

In 1996, twenty hours of teaching on the Seven Principles of the Manas were reserved for eleventh graders. According to a son-in-law of the family, who was a German teacher at the village school, the introduction of the Seven Principles was the only difference between Manas teaching before and after Independence. The following description of an Open Class based on the Sixth Principle of the Manas portrays the way the Principles were used



in society. It shows that the promotion of the Manas in the form of the Seven Principles fitted well into the lives of school children, teachers and parents in rural Narin. The Principles worked well as stepping stones for passing on moral values and helping the children position themselves in the natural and social world. Ethnicity was important in social positioning, and even the non-ethnic sixth Principle was coloured in with a high degree of ethnic consciousness. The children, all ethnic Kyrgyz in this class, were taught to connect their relationship with nature to the relationship with their ethnic group. The daily experience of seeing and eating berries and grain, for instance, was linked to ancient knowledge of its medicinal qualities, which was attributed to the Kyrgyz as a group, in an overarching association with the Manas epic. Singing, playing, dancing, reciting and the declamation of these values helped to embed them into the children's experience and understanding of the world.

In December 1996, the second grade of the Kazıbek school dedicated an Open Class to the Sixth Principle. The five- and six-year old children sang songs, danced, declaimed poems and recited the Manas for their parents and grandparents. On the blackboard the theme was written: 'Care for Nature'. The teacher asked the children some question about Manas and told them a story about Semetei, who came back to Talas and had great respect for its nature. A few children declaimed a poem about Manas, Almambet and their relationship to nature. The children then sang a song about the beautiful nature of At-Bashı, the rayon they live in. My host father, who had composed the song, played the accordion. Next, there was a little boy who held up a black berry (*karagat*) and declaimed its merits as food and medicine. He did the same for an orange berry (*ash*), juniper (*archa*), barley (*arpa*), rye (*budai*) and corn (*jügörü*). Two girls sang a song, followed by three boys singing another song. Then two young boys recited about Manas and Semetei with passion and enthusiasm.

Next was the core of the performance: a play about Semetei living with his mother and grandmother somewhere outside of Talas. Semetei resents his mother for not having told him anything about his homeland, and Khanikey (played by a grandchild of my host family) describes the beauty of Talas to him. There was a lot of text involved in this play, and all the five little actors knew every part of it by heart, as I could see them mouth all of the other players' lines. More songs followed, and three boys declaimed a text about 'the mountain people the Kyrgyz', asking the audience: if we didn't slaughter sheep, drink *kımi*, eat a lot of meat and braid the hair of our girls, would we then be real Kyrgyz? The performance ended with a song about the native language, which told

us that we used to speak Russian, but now everyone has to speak Kyrgyz to be well-educated.

When the children had finished their presentations, the head of the school gave a speech. A jury awarded pencils and erasers to the children – all received a prize this time. A mother from the audience thanked the teachers for teaching their children to recite the Manas and to dance. A grandmother praised the teachers for their achievements and good behaviour, after which we all proceeded to a room with a table filled with food: fried bread (*borsok*), carrot salad, candy, meat bouillon (*shorpo*), meat and a glass of cognac for the adults. The honour to propose a toast was reserved for one of the grandmothers.

In his capacity as a Kyrgyz hero and an ideal ancestor, Manas was incorporated into the self-identification of my Kyrgyz informants in different ways. One month after my arrival in the village Kazibek, the eldest son of the family and his wife, my translator, came over for tea. The conversation soon turned to the Manas. The youngest son started by laughing: ‘Manas is the Encyclopaedia of the Kyrgyz people!’ His eldest brother took over and said, more seriously:

I read the book when I was young. It taught me about the life of our ancestors, of the Kyrgyz culture, it showed how clever and strong they were. It also taught me about our enemies. Of course we are proud of the Manas, it is one of the longest epics in the world. I learnt about the ancient Kyrgyz territories. And with whom the Kyrgyz related, who their friends were. About food, national games, traditions of marriage, hospitality. How the Kyrgyz dealt with other nationalities. And for the Manas 1,000 celebrations, people from all over the world came and learned about Kyrgyzstan for the first time.

His wife, who had been translating, stressed the importance of that latter point:

The world knows about the Kyrgyz through the Manas epic. Like you, for example. Then Mother raised her voice and said: ‘I am also proud!!’ All laughed, but she continued undisturbed:

I like the traditions, and I am glad we have gone back to them. In the Soviet times, we followed Russian traditions, but now we go back to the Manas that we had forgotten and we use it in our daily lives.

My translator repeated to me what she had said the first week I was there:

We didn't learn about Kyrgyz literature and poets in school, and we were not very interested. We went to the movies and things like that, we didn't think about the Manas.

Now she added:

But it is important to know about it! From those interviews with you I have already learnt so much, and now I find it really important.

For my host family, the Manas had gained importance since independence. It was brought to their attention by the new government, and there was room and interest to reintegrate it into their daily lives. The eyes of foreigners such as myself also made them look at the epic with different eyes and roused their pride.

For others, the uproar about the Manas epic was nothing but shallow propaganda. I encountered this attitude mostly in Bishkek. Students of the International University of Kyrgyzstan made clear during an English class in 1996 that the Manas had no meaning for them. None of the students had ever heard a Manas recital and no-one had read it, although some students said they had seen a Manaschi recite on TV when they were a child. The only girl in the class that came from a village said that she had never seen a recital because there was no Manaschi in her village. An Uygur student said: 'I am not Kyrgyz! We Uygurs have our own epic!!' But when another student asked him what it was called, he could not tell him. A Kyrgyz girl said that she saw the Manas as a nice fairy tale. 'People are looking for a Kyrgyz culture of their own, and the Manas has been seized with both hands for this purpose. It is mostly to present ourselves to the outside world.' The class nodded in agreement. One student said that the 1,000<sup>th</sup> celebration had been a waste of money. 'So much money spent on a sumptuous feast when so many people were hungry!' When I told my Kyrgyz language teacher about this group discussion, she was appalled:

You should have said: shame on you!! This is your own culture! It is more than a fairytale, it is the history of Kyrgyzstan! Maybe it didn't really happen this way, but still it is valuable cultural heritage! It gives a good picture of our life back then.

Shame (*uyat*) was often mentioned when people talked about the meaning of the Manas epic.

This is not surprising, as the concept *uyat* has a central role in Kyrgyz life. Children are brought up and kept in check with the warning '*uyat bolot!*' (litt. 'there will be shame!'), a warning they hear a number of times every day. Adults too are very much concerned with whether their actions will be *uyat* or not. *Uyat* is so important that it is one of the very few Kyrgyz words that many Russians know.

Shame in connection with the Manas epic was expressed when people scolded others who did not know or care enough about the Manas. However, this accusation did not necessarily instil a feeling of shame in the addressee. It depended on the social context as to whether an accusation like this aroused shame or was easily discarded. The students in the above example would probably have shrugged their shoulders if I or their teacher had appealed to their sense of shame. Rather, they would have been ashamed to come forward and speak of positive encounters with the Manas epic in front of their fellow students. Had they been called upon their *uyat* at a feast (*toi*) with their Kyrgyz elders, however, as most of them do with weddings and funerals, they would have felt ashamed.

Pride of the Manas was often expressed in cliché terms, invented by scholars or politicians. In chapter two I already mentioned the Kyrgyz school girl who wrote ‘We are proud of the Manas epic’ (*Biz Manas eposu menen siymiktanabiz*). The general message of these slogans seems to convey that the Manas is proof that the Kyrgyz do count as a nation. Next to the repetition of slogans of a defensive kind of pride, I also encountered expressions of individual and joyous pride. An interesting example occurred during an interview with a researcher from the Kyrgyz Peace Research Centre. At the beginning of our meeting, the researcher told me that he found the fuss over the Manas epic an empty shell. It was all politics, he said, meant to fill up the gap left by the demise of Marxism-Leninism. He found it ridiculous that president Akayev evoked the spirit of Manas in government meetings. However, after a while he mentioned that he too had the Manas ‘in his blood’. His grandfather used to tell Manas, and as he spoke of these recitals, his eyes began to shine and pride and pleasure appeared on his face. The same happened when I met the brother of my landlady in Bishkek. He told me that the Manas is not as important for the Kyrgyz as president Akayev wishes to make out. But then he told me in detail the tales of Manas and Joloi that his grandfather used to tell him. As a boy, he was thrilled by these stories, and now he used them to raise his son. He then pointed at Akayev’s Seven Principles of the Manas to explain that the Manas has educational value. ‘My grandfather was born in the nineteenth century, but present-day elders (*ak sakaldar*) do not tell the Manas like before’, he said. ‘Only in times of war, like the Great Patriotic War (second world war) do people care about the Manas again, then they ask Manas for help.’ My landlady added to the conversation that the Kyrgyz love Manas, but they just don’t know it very well anymore.

In the realm of language a similar complexity of shame and pride was apparent. Although the ability to speak Kyrgyz and respect for the Manas epic cannot be equalled

offhand, they do have important similarities: they are both significant markers of Kyrgyz ethnic identity, they have both been influenced by Soviet ideologies and Russian culture and both have an important role in the positioning of different ethnic groups in independent Kyrgyzstan. Both touch directly upon the intricate dynamics of ethnic relations and imagery that has built up over centuries, was moulded into a specific form in Soviet times, and found new shapes in the years after independence. In certain cases they even come together, as is demonstrated in the following situation:

At the Manas Week of the American University, VOSST television station<sup>135</sup> had sent a camera crew to create a news item. The reporter assembled a number of people for short interviews, and as a foreigner I was considered an interesting catch. When I asked the reporter if the interview could be in Kyrgyz, her eyes lit up and she was all too pleased. When one of the Kyrgyz teachers asked the same thing, the reporter was reluctant, saying: 'Well... if you must...'. It soon became apparent that the reporter did not speak Kyrgyz very well herself. Her reluctance was probably induced by her unwillingness to be embarrassed in public. She had set that embarrassment aside with my interview, presumably because I was no native speaker myself. Furthermore, the added news value of the exotic occurrence of a foreign woman speaking Kyrgyz may have made it worth for her to try. Later on, Talantaalī, who always made a point of speaking Kyrgyz, told me he had not been able to convince the reporter, and had to conduct his interview in Russian. His superior at the Kyrgyz language and literature department said that it was good that he had spoken Russian, because now his colleagues knew he did know Russian after all. She said: 'I told them: Well, what did you think, that I would hire uneducated people?'

Just as with pride of the Manas epic, pride of the Kyrgyz language was sometimes expressed in cliché terms, conveying a defensive kind of pride. In the school of Pakrovka<sup>136</sup>, a village at the southern shore of Lake İssikköl, the hallway was decorated with the slogan: 'the language of Manas is our language' (*Manastın tili – bizdin tili*). The director of the Bishkek City Drama Theatre, a theatre group that performed experimental plays (most often in Kyrgyz), had the habit of addressing his audience in open discussions after the show. He always pleaded for *namıs* (pride, honour) in relation to Kyrgyz language

---

<sup>135</sup> VOSST was a Kyrgyzstani independent television station that cooperated closely with the Russian NTV network. It was banned in 2002 and continued its broadcasts under the name NTS.

<sup>136</sup> Its new Kyrgyz name Kızıl-Suu (Red Water or Red Stream) was hardly ever used at the time of my fieldwork.

and culture. As he said one day: 'We must not forget our language. We must be proud of it and speak it with honour.'

This proclamation was put into practice by Manaschī Talantaalī Bakchiev, but he was one of the few Kyrgyz who were conscientious about it. Certain politicians also made a point of speaking Kyrgyz all the time, such as Adatkhan Madumarov and Ömürbek Tekebaev. Madumarov told me he spoke Kyrgyz deliberately, because, as he said:

I am a patriot of my own people (*özümdün elim patriotu*). It is a requirement that the leaders (*jetekchiler*) speak Kyrgyz. I do not agree that Kyrgyz is a poor language. Just look at the Manas! We speak of languages as great (*uluu*): English is the great language of Shakespeare, Russian is the great language of Pushkin and Tolstoi, I speak of Kyrgyz as the great language of Manas and Toktogul. And of Madumarov! [he smiled] The past four-and-a-half years I have spoken as much Kyrgyz as possible.

Tekebaev, however, who was also known as a Kyrgyz patriot, told me he spoke Kyrgyz because his Kyrgyz is better than his Russian. Unlike the Kyrgyz pride that Madumarov displayed, he seemed rather ashamed of his poor Russian. His approach to the language issue was more pragmatic:

Kyrgyz is a language of daily life (*turmush*) and culture (*madaniyat*), it is not a technical (*tehnikalik*) language. In parliament sessions, I use many Russian terms because I don't know the newly invented Kyrgyz ones. If I read the Kyrgyz texts, I do not understand the new technical terms, so I stick to the Russian ones myself.

By the time that Russian was re-introduced as an official language, Tekebaev was the Speaker of parliament. The day the new law was discussed, he gave up speaking Kyrgyz and used Russian quite often.

If people did not speak their mother tongue, this was considered *uyat*. A young Kyrgyz lady of the 1999 population census committee said she was going to fill in 'Kyrgyz' at the question on mother tongue, even though she hardly ever spoke the language. She said:

My father and mother will say it is *uyat* if I fill in Russian. I am Kyrgyz, so I cannot fill in Russian. But I speak Russian even with them most of the time.

Many Russian-speaking young Kyrgyz were embarrassed when they could not converse in Kyrgyz with me, and told me it was *uyat* for them not to speak Kyrgyz. Britta Korth, a Swiss linguist who studied language attitudes in Kyrgyzstan, found that young people did not always accept the blame for this shameful fact. She quotes an informant:

... there are such people, elderly people, who reproach us for being Kyrgyz and not speaking Kyrgyz, but it is not our fault, if they had taught us Kyrgyz... (Korth, 2005:157)

For many years, however, it had been very shameful not to know Russian. Korth cites informants who had experienced shame for not speaking Russian. For urban Kyrgyz children this often started when they went to a Russian school:

... and in school (...) of course for me that was just horrible, they were laughing at me, because I did not speak correctly... (ibid.:148).

Or even in kindergarten:

... and also the educators in kindergarten, for example, they forced you to speak Russian; and the children, if I spoke Kyrgyz, they would simply not be with me, next to me, they would not play with me, would not speak to me... (ibid.:147).

In 2000, this was still reality for many Bishkek children. Britta Korth was setting up a project for bilingual kindergartens, and I went along one day to a kindergarten in Bishkek that had just commenced bilingual teaching. In the court yard I spoke Kyrgyz to the children. The Russian-speaking children laughed when I spoke Kyrgyz to them and ran off to play somewhere else. Two Kyrgyz-speaking children came to sit next to me, but also laughed when I spoke Kyrgyz to them. They did not reply to my questions. They said to the Russian-speaking children who looked at us that they did not speak Kyrgyz - in Russian. At this very young age, the children's confusion and shame were almost tangible. Also, adults felt shame for not speaking Russian properly. Britta Korth quotes:

... a big room, I get frightened, because I do not say the endings right mmmm or I don't say the right word ... (ibid.:149).

However, the new language policy heightened awareness and gave room for a new pride among many adults. Korth quotes:

... from that let's say, I do not have the same complex, that I had when I enrolled in university, now I don't have it. I can say whatever I want, without worrying about not speaking correctly ... (ibid.).

For not speaking Kyrgyz, people would use the noun *uyat* (shame) but for not speaking Russian, people used the verb *uyaldim* (I was ashamed). The difference in word form reflects the differences in shame: a universal and defensive statement for Kyrgyz, as opposed to a personal and intimate expression for Russian. Britta Korth describes these differences as follows when she describes the difference in respect for Russian and Kyrgyz:

Respect for knowing and speaking Kyrgyz and respect for speaking Russian are based on different values. People respect Russian speakers because Russian symbolizes modernity and, to a certain degree, educatedness. A Kyrgyz speaker, in contrast, will be respected for not denying his/her traditions, in particular if he/she speaks Kyrgyz without Russian “contamination” (ibid.:161).

Attitudes towards the Manas epic can be described in a similar way. My informants expressed respect for and enjoyment of the Manas within the framework of Kyrgyz culture. They connected the Manas to social family gatherings, such as story telling by their grandfathers or villages feasts. The Manas also occupied a respected place in settings of an ethnic Kyrgyz nature, such as Kyrgyz festivals, celebrations for Kyrgyz prominent people and political glorification of the Kyrgyz nation. In the internationalist realm, however, the Manas was often viewed as trivial or even backward. My translator in Kazıbek told me that when she was young, she had fierce discussions with her mother about religion and the Manas.

When I was in school, I did not believe in religion and did not care about the Manas. I had lots of arguments with my mother about it. My generation was influenced by the Soviet power, but for our parents and grandparents, religion and the Manas were still important. Now we also learn about them again, and we feel that atheism went against our own roots. Now I also believe in religion and in the importance of the Manas.

With the demise of Soviet ideologies, the Manas came to have a different value for many. Appropriating the Manas became a form of going back to one’s roots that had been abandoned under the influence of the Soviets. Furthermore, the Manas was no longer confined to the realm of the family and tradition, but came to play an important role in the connection between the Kyrgyz and the outside world. The ‘Manas 1,000’ festival had brought many foreign dignitaries to Kyrgyzstan - the epic lured European, Turkish and Japanese scholars to Kyrgyzstan, tourists were interested and impressed by the epic and Manaschıs were invited to recite in far-away cities. With independence, the Manas epic thus came to both express and incite a new pride in being Kyrgyz.



#### 4.3.3.4 The political use of Manas Epic and Manaschi's

By now, the reader may wonder how the bearers of the Manas epic, the Manaschi's, feel about the political use of the Manas epic. For Talantaali Bakchiev, the Manas could be a perfect basis for Kyrgyzstan's political and moral development. But he disapproves of the way it was put to use by the present government. He told me:

The Manas would be a good guideline for the Kyrgyz. The Islam can't work because the Kyrgyz are no good Muslims. And democracy is too alien for us. But the Manas is near to the bone, it belongs to the life and culture of the Kyrgyz themselves. Japan, for example, that is a country with a political system close to the culture of the people themselves. It works very well there. Here, we should use the Manas. And we should get the right attitude from the Manas. The Seven Principles are not enough. There is a Kyrgyz philosopher who has worked it out much clearer. What the government has done so far with its Manas propaganda is only a first step. It has made the Manas well-known, and that was a good thing. But actually, the government used the Manas for its own gain, such as foreign contracts and loans. What we need now is the second step: to really live according to the Manas. And that is a very difficult step.

Talantaali was sceptical about the way the government used the Manas epic. He often told me:

They only use the Manas when they need it. When it has lost its value, they forget about it.

And:

They use the Manas for their own purposes. In 1995 for example a lot of money came in for the Manas festival, but where is that now? One of the goals was to write down the versions of Shaabai and Kaba, but that never happened. Kaba and Shaabai have been abused, they served for propaganda during the celebrations but after that they were left to their own devices. There is no respect for national artists.

That Akayev's attitude towards the Manas mattered to Talantaali became apparent when he told me:

A friend of mine, a painter, once shared an airplane with president Akayev. Akayev told him that he thinks Manas is a historic figure. This was a very important remark!! I am glad he said this.

Kaba Atabekov never said anything to me about the Manas as a figure head for independent Kyrgyzstan. The only time we talked politics in relation to the Manas was when he said he disliked the Communist Party. He explained:

Kaba: I didn't like the Party. They were liars. They claimed that God does not exist.

Me: What did they think of Manas?

Kaba: Oh, they didn't like him, they said that he too never existed. They refused a celebration of the 1,000<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1947.

Me: But a lot of research on the Manas was done then.

Kaba: Oh yes, they came all the way from Latvia.

At the annual conference of the American University in 2000, in the session on 'Kyrgyz culture between two centuries', the linguist and poet (*akin*) Salijan Jigitov spoke on the relationship between politics and literature. At question time, Talantaali asked him what he thought of the Manas epic. Jigitov replied:

All the parasites that abuse the Manas nowadays are idealising the Manas. The Seven Principles are a botch-job (*pendechilik*, litt. human-ness). You see, the Soviet government has idealised the Manas as art from the people, and that is what we have to live with now. The Manas should be respected, but not in this way. It also should not be read but listened to. These days it is written in prose (*kara söz*)! It is used by everyone, here in Kyrgyzstan but also in Turkey and Moscow and other places.

But we have to realise that these days, no-one reads a long story like an epic poem anymore. We just have to shorten it into a novel.

A sceptical attitude towards political interest in the Manas, fitting in with the general scepticism towards government policies, prevailed among Manaschīs and other poets. In the latter parts of the 1990s, Manaschīs had become increasingly disappointed by what the propagation of the Manas actually meant for them. Yes, festivals were held, yes, a Manas school was opened, yes, scholarly books were (re)published. But Manaschīs did not find a new substantial arena for their art. However this did not mean that they lost their old arenas. As we have seen in chapter 2, Manaschīs still recite at feasts and ritual gatherings. They also have an audience in scholars and journalists just as before, although now these come from countries outside the former Soviet Union. Manas competitions continue in a mostly unaltered Soviet style. Publications also find their way, be it unaided by the government. Manas visions and dreams continue, and people are interested to hear about them. For Manaschīs, the political Manas propaganda has touched the surface of their art,

but the undercurrent, fed by visions and personal dedication, is a much stronger force that will probably surpass political whims and fashions.

## Chapter five    Conclusions

In the process of describing various aspects of the social context of the Manas epic, one thing has become clear: there is no such thing as *the* Manas epic. Rather, ‘the Manas epic’ is a term that refers to a repository of tales, practices, usages and meanings. All aspects of the Manas epic that I have portrayed in the preceding chapters have proven to be fluid and variable. Whether we look at the storyline, the forms of expression, the purpose of working with the Manas, the political connotations, or the social position of Manas users, not a single facet of the Manas is fixed. The Manas epic is thus not a ‘thing’ – or even an intangible entity – that is out there and ready to be picked up by various actors. Rather, it is an umbrella term that is open for multiple interpretations and applications. Returning to the analogy in chapter one of knowledge as an edifice, the Manas epic can be seen as a concept that supplies a set of building blocks, which can be arranged at the proper judgment of each individual, at a given point in time. These arrangements lead to different outcomes in behaviour, meaning and form – although individuals may not be aware of this in their interactions. People may think they share the same images when they discuss the Manas epic, when in fact they maintain very distinct, or even opposing, notions on form, practice and meaning of the Manas.

In this study, I have tried to unravel some of the underlying notions that have been constructed by individuals involved with the Manas epic. For this purpose, I have singled out three forms of expression of the epic and used them as focal points: oral performance, publication and political rhetoric based on the Manas epic. However, these three expression forms are cut across by a number of variables that are also of great importance for the outcome of the construction that individuals make. Next to form, we can distinguish content, time, purpose, actors and meaning as influencing variables. In this final chapter, I will re-examine the material that I have presented in the foregoing chapters through the lens of these variables.

## 5.1 Form

The original form of the Manas epic has been oral performance, which is practiced up to this day. An oral performance of the Manas epic is characterised by a number of features. First of all, the tale of Manas is not narrated in every-day speech, but in ritualised fashion. The tale is told by specialists in the epic, who use poetry made up of alliteration and end-rhyme, in a cadence based on a seven-syllabic rhythm. Although the Manas is said to be ‘told’ (*aitilgan*), Manaschīs use a variety of melodies which are alternated with particular speech that sounds like the comment is ‘rattled off’. Recitals are unaccompanied by instruments, a practice that distinguishes the Manas from other forms of tale-telling. When available, Manaschīs wear special attire during a performance, in the form of robes and felt hats, and some remove their spectacles, watches and other accessories. A Manas recital can take place at several types of occasions: at lifecycle celebrations (*toi*) such as festive meals for birth, marriage or death, to entertain guests who have come for other reasons, at praying sessions in holy places (*mazar*), at Manaschī competitions, at scholarly Manas conferences, in school lessons, or alone, if a Manaschī feels the need to recite but fears or lacks an audience.

A second feature of the oral performance of the Manas which I have described is that the story is not reproduced word by word from memory, but that it is composed within the performance. With a set of formulae in mind, Manaschīs procure a different composition of words for every performance. Even the contents of the tale can vary from period to period and from Manaschī to Manaschī. The fact that every Manaschī has his own version is not only accepted as an inevitable given in oral performance, it is encouraged and even deemed essential to the art of narration. A Manaschī who simply copies existing versions is generally not seen as a ‘real’ Manaschī. It is not forbidden to learn other people’s tales by heart, but this yields less prestige. A third feature, which flows on as a direct result of the second, is that no standard version of the epic exists. The contention that there are several ‘schools’ that transmit a certain version cannot even be substantiated. Every Manaschī has his own version of the Manas tale.

Thus, even if we focus just on the expression form of oral performance, the Manas turns out to be fluid and flexible by nature. No performances are alike, and neither are they supposed to be.

Next to the polymorphic form of oral performance, new forms of Manas expression have appeared under the influence of Russian, Jadid and Soviet actors. A stream of publications of the tale in both poetry and prose has emerged since the late nineteenth

century. Thus, when someone speaks about 'the Manas epic', he or she may refer to a body of books rather than to a narrated tale. This body of books consists of recorded versions of Manas narrations, more or less heavily edited, compilations of recitals of various Manaschiis, translations of Manas texts into different languages and a number of novels and children books that tell Manas tales in prose. The books have been issued in chapbook form, standard and deluxe editions, some of which have been illustrated. Presently, it is hard to obtain copies of most of these books in bookstores. They can be found in libraries, universities and in the homes of individuals. Although the existence of the Manas epic in book form has altered the perception of the tale substantially, it seems that the books themselves are not often read.

Contrary to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century predictions, the introduction of literacy has not led to the standardisation of the epic. None of the above-mentioned publications have acquired the status of a final version. The flexible nature of the oral epic has been transposed to the written form, and the act of writing down oral narrations has merely led to an abundance of versions. In addition to the numerous Manas publications, the Academy of Sciences stocks an archive full of verse lines that have not yet been printed and may very well never reach the public.

Secondly, the influx of newcomers introduced a host of new art forms that transformed Manas themes to opera, theatre, painting, sculpture and film. These art forms, which made the Manas epic more easily accessible than the poetry books did, contributed new images to the 'floating memories' of the Manas epic. In narrations, the characters are described in such hyperbolic terms in narrations, that the audience cannot create consistent mental pictures. The introduction of tangible models, in the form of linocuts and actors, has given these epic characters a face. The demands that flow from the inner logic of the new art forms thus inevitably added different forms to the concept 'Manas epic'. Thirdly, the newcomers introduced scholarly study of the Manas epic. This gave life to scholarly treatises in the form of articles in newspapers and journals, a number of monographs and debates on various aspects of the Manas epic in classrooms and at conferences.

The employment of the Manas as a political symbol gave rise to yet more new forms for the Manas epic. Most remarkably are the Seven Principles that were introduced during president Akayev's term in office. These principles formed seven pillars for a new State ideology and as such portrayed the course of the new government rather than the moral of the tales themselves. Political use of the Manas epic also brought forth large-scale

Manas festivals. In Soviet times, the idea for the celebration of the epic's 1,000<sup>th</sup> (or 1,100<sup>th</sup>) anniversary was conceived, but not executed until 1995. A number of commemoration festivals for Manaschīs or events related to the Manas have also taken place since that time. At these festivals, a selection of the above-mentioned forms of the Manas epic is displayed. At the 1995 'Manas 1,000' festival, all of the above forms found their way into the Program. Interestingly, oral performance of the epic formed a small portion, tucked away in the so-called 'Musical-Ethnographic Evening'.

## 5.2 Content

Considering the contents of the Manas epic, we find once again that the umbrella term hides many variations. The question: 'What is the Manas epic about?' has many potential replies, depending on the context of the question, the questioner and the respondent. The story of Manas I have presented in chapter one is the plot of an English translation of a recorded version from a specific Manaschī – it is not *the* storyline of the Manas. A number of elements recur in the versions that we know today. There is the long-awaited, supernaturally announced and difficult birth of Manas, his childhood as an unmanageable rascal, the formation of an army of forty knights (*choro*), his special friendship with Almambet, the son of an enemy, Manas' marriage to beautiful and wise Khanikey and his participation in the memorial feast for Kōkötōi Khan. The Great Campaign was not among the episodes recorded by nineteenth-century folk poetry collectors Radloff and Valikhanov, but is now generally seen as the climax of the tale. Manas scholars have even argued that the Great Campaign was the very first Manas poem, upon which the others were subsequently built. In the Great Campaign, Manas and his knights ride to Bejin (interpreted to denote the Chinese capital Bei-jing or the Uygur capital Bei-tin) where they fight a fierce and brave battle. The battle is lost and many of the knights die. In most versions, Manas is mortally wounded as well and dies on his return to Khanikey. The second and third part of the Manas trilogy tell the tales of Manas' son Semetei and his grandson Seitek respectively.

The details of these recurring elements, however, vary considerably from narrator to narrator. To name just one, in the version recorded from Sagımbai, Manas marries Khanikey when his father has found her in a successful bride search. In Sayakbai's recorded version, it is one of Manas' knights who brings his old, unrequited love Khanikey to Manas' attention. Furthermore, Manaschīs insert elements that others leave out or even contest. Sagımbai tells of Manas' pilgrimage to Mecca, but the present-day Manaschīs I

met denied that Manas ever went there. Talantaalī Bakchiev dreamt the episode of the memorial feast for Manas and recited this at a Manaschī competition. As a young Manaschī at the beginning of his career, he was scolded for narrating an episode that ‘does not exist’.

It is not unlikely that the contents of the tales also vary from narrator to narrator. As Manaschīs do not learn parts of the tale by heart but recite on the spot, every performance emerges slightly differently. Events may evolve in concert with the changes in the personal life of a Manaschī, due to contact with other Manaschīs or the occurrence of new dreams and visions.

The same can be said for publications of recorded Manas versions. The version of Sagımbai that was recorded by Miftakov and Abdırakhmanov from 1922 – 1926 has been published in many different forms, all containing different contents. The most severe editing was done for the 1950s combined version (*kurama variant*), consequential to the political pressures of the time. Editing for aesthetic or practical reasons has determined the contents of other publications of Sagımbai’s version. Translating this version to Russian, English, or other languages has inevitably altered the contents as well.

In a political and symbolic context, the question: ‘what is the Manas about?’ yields different answers in different situations. The answer propagated by the government in the late 1990s was that the Manas epic is about patriotism, interethnic cooperation, peaceful relations with neighbouring nations and love for nature. Manas is described as a Kyrgyz hero who unites the Kyrgyz tribes and leads them back to their native land. In the Soviet era, the discussion as to whether the Manas was about freedom or about bourgeois-nationalism and feudalism emerged time and again. The pinnacle in this argument was reached in the 1950s, when criticism on the Manas epic at the time of ‘the crisis of the Turkic epics’ (Bennigsen, 1975:464) led to fierce resistance in Kyrgyzstan. A conference in 1952 was organised to resolve the question whether the Manas was a nationalist or a folk epic. The conference concluded with a declaration that stated that the Manas was a folk epic, but that the versions at hand contained many nationalist and feudal-clerical elements. A cleansed version was needed, based on a combination of the available adaptations, which led to the creation of the above-mentioned combined version (*kurama variant*).

In the nineteenth century, the Manas epic seemed much less concerned with ethnicity and patriotism as it became later on. The idea that the Manas epic is the tale of a Kyrgyz hero who fights for the freedom of his nation is untenable for the nineteenth-



century recorded versions. The ethnic affiliation of Manas is not univocal in these tales – if he is described by his ethnic background at all, it is never as a Kyrgyz. Religion and personality are much more important identity markers for Manas and the other heroes. For enemies, an ethnic description is more common.

### 5.3 Time

As is clear from the above, the concept ‘Manas epic’ hosts a number of forms and contents in different time frames. In this study, I have singled out three periods to address the aspect of change that occurs over time: the periods before, during and after the Soviet Union. These periods should not be seen as separate unities with clear-cut boundaries. Although 1917 and 1991 can be taken as markers for the beginning and the end of the Soviet Union, the processes that have affected the Manas epic reach across these dates, in the same way that the lives of the people involved with the Manas epic stretch over different periods. The Soviet era as a historic period has such strong symbolic power, however, that it is often invoked by those living in or studying the former Soviet Union. When handled with care, the periodisation can shed light on the influence of radical political and economic shifts on the life of an epic tale.

Of the time before the Soviet Union, documentation on the Manas epic is limited to a sixteenth century Farsi text called the *Majmu-at-Tavarikh*, the works of Wilhelm Radloff and Chokan Valikhanov and a number of scattered poems and treatises. In the *Majmu-at-Tavarikh*, Manas is described in prose as a historic figure. He is the son of a Kipchak leader and fights a number of battles against Kalmaks. Many of the names in the *Majmu* correspond with names that occur in present-day versions, but the story line differs substantially. Is it difficult to assess whether Manas’ occurrence in the *Majmu* means that he was seen as a historic figure instead of an epic character in the sixteenth century, or whether the *Majmu* is rather a collection of tales than an historic overview. We should not exclude the possibility that the authors of the *Majmu* perceived ‘history’ in a different way altogether, without mutually exclusive categories of fact and fiction. Still, the *Majmu* provides very little information on the role of the Manas epic in society in the sixteenth century.

Radloff and Valikhanov provide more information about the social context of the Manas tales they recorded. An image arises of the Manas epic as part of a lively story telling tradition, passed on by professional narrators at social gatherings. The narrators

improvise their poems while narrating, using a number of fixed expressions, adjusting their tales to the audience at hand and regarding their improvisations as God-given.

In the days of political turmoil in the Tsarist Empire, versions of the Manas epic were written down by Jadid folklore collectors who were committed to collecting artistic expression of Turkic peoples. By the 1930s, these recordings came under the scrutiny of the administration of the newly formed Soviet Socialist Republic Kirgizia. A speech by Maxim Gorky in 1934 had changed the official attitude towards folk tales and other forms of folklore from indifference to enthusiasm and control. Gorky had hailed folklore as an expression of the deepest moral aspiration of the masses, but in practice, the contents of folk tales and poems often conveyed what were considered to be aristocratic ideologies. If folklore was to play a role in the construction of a socialist society, administrators wanted to secure influence over its contents.

Folklore came to play an important role in the approach to nationalism, or ‘the national question’, of the Soviet government. Fearing the attraction of nationalist ideas on the population, the Soviet government proclaimed the freedom for self-determination as an unalienable right of the nations of the Soviet Union. To assure this, the Soviet Union was divided into a large number of ethnicity-based administrative units that were endowed with native languages, native language education and priority in access to jobs for members of the nation that gave the unit its name. The specific Soviet representation of the nation did not fit in neatly with ideas on ethnicity everywhere in the Tsarist Empire. In many cases, the selected ethnic groups had to be constructed from the top down, or had to be separated from other ethnic groups, and inhabitants were often assigned an ethnic affiliation (*natsionalnost*). In this process, folklore played an important role. The existence of national epics supported the claims of elites that the ethnic group was a nation. Once the administration had recognised a nation, folklore served to raise national consciousness among the population assigned to the ethnic group.

The Soviet period therefore had a paradoxical influence on the development of the Manas epic. On the one hand, the epic was propagated as the rich culture of the Kyrgyz masses, attesting to the importance of ethnicity as a factor for social organisation, the eminence of the Kyrgyz nation and the freedom awarded to the nations of the Soviet Union. On the other hand, the contents of the epic had to fit in with Marxist-Leninist ideology. The Manas could not be allowed to form a threat to the solidarity of the workers and peasants by propagating religious or national solidarities. Nor should it keep the Kyrgyz in a feudal stage and stand in the way of their economic, social and cultural

development. For the latter problem, the introduction of new art forms produced a solution. Publication of Manas versions was facilitated, operas and movies based on Manas themes were released, the main airport was named after Manas and a sculpture complex of Manas figures adorned a central square. The first problem of propagation of religious and nationalist solidarities in the Manas was solved by means of censorship. Censorship of the publications, and probably also of the oral performance, reached a peak in the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1940s, requests for a celebration of an anniversary of the epic were turned down, or if they were granted, never materialised. By the 1970s, Manas protagonists found more room for manoeuvre and a new series of publications was less severely censored. As ethnic consciousness of the population was built up, the opposite of the original goal of the nationalities' policy was achieved: instead of being grateful that their nation determined its own course, people felt restricted in their freedom to express their national character in the way they seemed fit. Although the Manas epic had been recognised as a prime folkloric emblem, published, studied and employed in modern arts during the Soviet period, in the *perestroika* and *glasnost* period dissatisfaction with the control that had been exerted over the expression of the epic became increasingly voiced. During all of this, individual Manaschis continued to receive vocation dreams and felt the urge to tell the tale of Manas.

With Independence, the Manas epic was used to fill the ideological void left by the demise of Marxism-Leninism. It seemed a perfect choice: the Manas epic had come to embody the wisdom, ancientness and strength of the Kyrgyz nation. Furthermore, the epic could work well as a symbol that would unite many people without arousing difficult political discussions. Anthony Cohen has described the workings of symbols as follows:

Symbols [...] 'express' other things in ways which allow their common form to be retained and shared among the members of a group, whilst not imposing upon these people the constraints of uniform meaning. They can thus provide media through which individuals can experience and express their attachment to a society without compromising their individuality (Cohen, 1985:18).

Cohen illustrates this by using the example of the peace symbol ☸. This symbol unites large crowds on peace demonstrations. Participants all comfortably associate themselves with this symbol, but were they to debate issues such as the importance of religion, pacifism or socialism in the peace process, they would soon discover fundamental and perhaps conflicting differences. This versatility of symbols is not their flaw, but rather their

strength: people of radically opposed views can find their own meanings in what nevertheless remain common symbols (ibid.).

On first sight, the Manas epic has potential of being such a symbol. The general image of the Manas as a Kyrgyz masterpiece of heroic art overarches more controversial ideas on religion and spiritualism, regional differences, correct leadership, foreign relations, the role of women in society or the use of natural resources. Most Kyrgyz people happily identify themselves with the epic. However, here lies a crucial shortcoming of the Manas as a unifying symbol in Kyrgyzstan: the epic has become a symbol for the Kyrgyz, not the Kyrgyzstani population. In the 1990s, Kyrgyzstan housed a high number of non-Kyrgyz inhabitants who had never felt to be immigrants when it was part of the Soviet Union. President Akayev was devoted to keeping the non-Kyrgyz members of the citizenry involved in the republic to dam the brain- drain of departing Russians, Germans and Jews, and to avoid further ethnic conflict between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz since the Osh riots of 1990. The Manas epic, which appealed to an ethnic approach to Statehood, disagreed with the civic approach to Statehood that Akayev propagated. After immense promotion of the Manas in the 1995 'Manas 1,000' festival, political interest in the Manas epic slowly withered away.

Manaschīs, however, did not lose their interest in the epic. They found a new audience in European, American, Turkish, Japanese and other scholars, journalist and tourists. They travel abroad to perform and invite foreigners into their houses to be filmed and interviewed. Their usual performances at Kyrgyz social gatherings, spiritual meetings and Manaschī competitions also continue to take place. Manas classes at schools and universities are remnants of the political interest and create platforms from which Manaschīs are able to narrate the tale. Still, it is difficult for Manaschīs to generate income from their recitals. They even have to raise funds for the publications of their written versions themselves, which is not easy. This does not distract them from their profession, however, as this is perceived as a calling, a duty that cannot be ignored.

#### **5.4 Purpose**

The purposes for bringing out and engaging in the Manas epic are diverse and contribute to the variation in images under the Manas umbrella. Aesthetics and entertainment are not the sole reasons for occupying oneself with the Manas. The Manas epic can also be invoked for spiritual and political purposes.

When aesthetics and entertainment are the main concern for invoking the Manas, artistic values determine the shape of the Manas. The epic has to be interesting, attractive, of high quality – whether it is narrated, painted or filmed. On the aesthetic appraisal of the oral performance, Radloff writes that the nineteenth-century audience appreciated the enumeration of Manas' knights most, a passage that seemed a 'welter of words and artificial rhyme twists' to him (Radloff, 1885:XIX). Next to word-craft, melodies and expressiveness are important parts of the aesthetics of an oral performance. For the other art forms, the balance between traditional elements of the Manas epic and the demands of the new art form constitutes a crucial choice for the artist. The intended audience is undeniably an influence on the outcome of their piece of art.

When the Manas is invoked for spiritual purposes, the most important aspect is that the Manaschi has contact with the Spirit of Manas through dreams and visions. If the Manaschi has healing powers, this adds to the spiritual experience of the Manas epic. The Manas can be narrated at healing sessions or at holy places, to deepen the connection of the participants with the spiritual world. Manaschis have also reported to narrate the tale without an audience, just to let out the energy that they receive. The contact with the supernatural world is established through energy, Manaschi Talantaali Bakchiev told me. He used the Russian word *energia* to describe this process. The Kyrgyz word often used is *kasiet*<sup>137</sup>. During a Manas recital, this energy is felt by both narrator and audience, and is seen as the cause for the bodily sensations that are conjured up by the narration. John D. Niles, who has seen this phenomenon in non-spiritual narrations as well, calls it 'somatic communication' (Niles, 1999:53). For Niles, this specific feature of oral performance forms its main component and distinguishing factor from written texts. If non-Manaschis work with the energy of Manas, they have to be very careful. I have been given many examples of people who died or who have fallen ill after making a movie or a book about Manas.

Government politicians have political reasons for staging the Manas. They use it as a symbol for the unity, strength and wisdom of the Kyrgyz nation by the Kyrgyz government, both in relation to their electorate and towards the outside world. But government politicians are not the only faction that uses the Manas epic for political purposes. Kyrgyz elders also use the contents of Manas versions to discuss history and customary law. This exercise helps them to position themselves as knowledgeable and

---

<sup>137</sup> *Kasiet*, originally an Arabic word, means 'sacred power' in this context

wise authorities within the Kyrgyz social sphere and it helps shape their views and opinions. School teachers use the *Manas* for the education of moral values and political principles. In doing so, they are led by the government, but have some room for manoeuvre themselves. *Manaschīs* too can have political purposes for their recitals and base parts of the contents of their versions on their political standpoints. For instance, the importance of ethnicity in the *Manas* increased when ethnicity became a determinant in political relations. During Soviet times, a *Manaschī* even claimed that *Manas* had designed a Five Year Plan. Talantaalī Bakchiev, who wishes to return to what he sees as a more authentic rendering of the epic and the way of life in *Manas*' days, introduces shamanistic and Buddhist elements into his version.

## 5.5 Actors

The *Manas* epic is shaped by a large number of individual actors, who take up different roles. They can be *Manaschīs*, audience, scholars, artists or politicians, to name the most noticeable roles.

Not everyone can take up the role of *Manaschī*. If one wants to be a real *Manaschī* (*chīnīgī Manaschī*), one has to await a vocation dream. This is generally seen to be reserved for ethnic Kyrgyz, and most often to men. The vocation dream usually comes when the *Manaschī*-to-be is in his early teens. Learning the epic by heart, on the other hand, can be carried out by everyone, even by children, women and non-Kyrgyz people. These *Manaschīs* are called *jattama Manaschī*. Among real *Manaschīs*, age, gender and ethnicity are of influence on their social status. The status of Great *Manaschī* cannot be reached at a young age. One needs seniority as much as knowledge of the epic to qualify for this title. As I mentioned earlier, Talantaalī Bakchiev has experienced how difficult it is to gain authority as a young *Manaschī*. His recital of the memorial feast for *Manas* (*Manastīn ashī*) at a *Manaschī* competition was not accepted by the jury because Talantaalī was too young to bring forth an episode 'that did not exist' – even though the episode had come to him in a dream. The gender of real *Manaschīs* is commonly male. Female *Manaschīs* exist, such as Great *Manaschī* Seidene Moldokova and the female *Manaschī* of my fieldwork, Kamīnbübü Abraimova. However, these women are not taken serious by all. Male *Manaschīs* often claim that women are too weak to deal with the strong energies involved in being a *Manaschī*. Of Seidene, it was said that she is 'merely' a *Semeteichi* (one who recites the tale of *Manas*' son *Semetei*). Kamīnbübü was gossiped to be a fraud and not a *Manaschī* at all. The lack of legends on early female *Manaschīs* might indicate

that their occurrence is a recent phenomenon, arisen with the Soviet propagation of equal rights for women. Talantaali Bakchiev suggested that if a woman receives a vocation dream, she should go to a Great Manaschi and ask him to request that the Spirit of Manas exonerate her from her duty. This could only benefit her, as she runs a high risk of succumbing to the intensities of being a Manaschi. Ethnicity for real Manaschis is fixed: only the Kyrgyz can be called by the Spirit of Manas. This was claimed by my informants, and indeed, I have not heard of any non-Kyrgyz to have had a vocation dream. It is not clear what ethnicity meant to the Manaschis of older days, but at present, their Kyrgyz-ness is never questioned. Some Manaschis wonder if it can be sustained that only members of their own clan (*uruu*) can become Great Manaschis. Talantaali Bakchiev argues that if this is true, it is due to the power (*kasiet*) that emanates from Lake Issikköl.

The audience of Manas recitals is made up of individuals from many different strata. Guests at a wedding where a Manaschi is present are transformed into an audience as soon as the Manaschi is asked to recite. They generally listen politely or with interest, and indicate the end of their concentration by murmuring amongst themselves or commencing to eat from the table in front of them. Recitals at conferences are attended by scholars and students. Their attitude towards the performance differs enormously, as I have described in chapter two. A new stratum of audience is made up of foreign scholars, journalists and travellers, who are usually attracted to the exotic nature of a Manas recital. Although they often do not understand the words, most of them are fascinated by the performance nonetheless. This new audience tends to give the narrator financial rewards in one form or the other.

The study of the Manas epic, together with the introduction of new art forms, offered opportunities for non-Manaschis to work with the Manas. The newcomers even managed to obtain higher status and better incomes than the Manaschis under Soviet rule. Scholars did this by claiming a more sophisticated knowledge of the epic. They refuted the claims of vocations dreams and visions and explained their occurrence in psychological terms: the dreams were ‘a result from the creative power’ of Manaschis, due to their ‘belief in such a thing’ (Musaev, 1994: 121). The creators of new art forms benefited from the appreciation of Russian, European culture as more civilised and sophisticated than Kyrgyz, Asian culture. Presently, Manaschis have incorporated some of these new roles into their own Manaschihood. Kaba Atabekov does this by writing down his version of the Manas and Talantaali Bakchiev has become a Manas scholar.

## 5.6 Meaning

As has been demonstrated, the Manas epic appears in many different forms and its contents perpetually change over time. It comes as no surprise, then, that the epic contains many different meanings, depending on the purpose of its employment and on the role of individual actors. The Manas is thus a true symbol in Cohen's understanding of the word: at first sight, the Manas epic seems to be a clear, coherent 'thing', but with closer inspection the term turns out to house a number of different, and even conflicting, understandings and practices.

The set of meanings that come with the Manas epic as a spiritual form of expression may not be shared by everyone. The same holds for the Manas epic as a written text. One thing that most people do agree upon is that the Manas epic extracts its meaning from a close connection with the Kyrgyz world. Within Kyrgyzstan, the Kyrgyz and Russian spheres have long been separated by language. Although Kyrgyz people entered the Russian world and Russians came into contact with the Kyrgyz world, the two worlds remain to be perceived as entirely different from one another. Associations with the Kyrgyz world are described as traditional, backward, nomadic, rural and Muslim. The Russian world is associated with modern, civilised, cultured, agricultural or urban and Christian Orthodox. The two languages appeal to this set of stereotypes and set the atmosphere for the reception of a text or utterance. Even if they are literal translations of the same words, a Kyrgyz text conjures up different images and emotions to a Russian text. The lack of knowledge of the Kyrgyz language of most Russians has kept this divide alive and strong. The Manas epic appeals directly to the perception of the Kyrgyz realm, even after its translation to Russian. Russian translations of the text are often considered to convey the epic incorrectly, first of all because the cadence of rhyme and alliteration gets lost, but secondly because the emotional connotation of Russian words is so different. The Manas epic is seen as the apogee of Kyrgyz civilisation. In the programme of the 'Manas 1,000' festival, this is described as follows:

The Kyrgyz people have enriched the world culture with the unique epos "Manas", which is incomparable in its volume and rich content. The epos "Manas" is the national pride of the Kyrgyz people, the peak of their spiritual life, which they inherited from their ancestors. The epos "Manas" is often referred to as "the epos-ocean", because it is as vast as an ocean in its volume and depth of content, it reflects the ancient history of the Kyrgyz people, their social life covering the period of millennium [sic] (Asankanov and Omurbekov, 1995: no page number).



In this capacity, the Manas epic has become a commodity in the hands of Manaschīs, Manas scholars, artists and politicians who want to acquire a position in the international realm. The interest in the exotic, the old and the traditional in the wealthier countries of the world has made involvement in the Manas epic relatively profitable. Directly, as this trend has opened the opportunity for Manaschīs, Manas scholars and Kyrgyz artists to obtain funding for their professions. Indirectly, as positioning Kyrgyzstan as an ancient nation with traditions that have been suppressed for a long time generates sympathy among foreign governments and investors, which yields higher loans, investments and aid.

A result of this specific meaning of the Manas epic has been that the Kyrgyz art of epic telling was placed on the UNESCO list of ‘the Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity’. The action plan that was drawn up included initiatives to set up training courses and concert tours, the compilation of a representative, concise edition of the Manas and its translation into Russian, and the training of scholars in creating and managing digitalised Manas archives. UNESCO recognition of the art of epic telling might turn out to be a significant step in the course of the oral performance of the Manas epic, as well as the publication of written versions and the use of the Manas in political rhetoric. It may prove to be a positive impetus by providing material support to those who work with the Manas epic. However, it may also have unpredicted side effects, such as a loss of flexibility of epic narration, or the transformation of the Manas epic into a tool in the hands of clever entrepreneurs who will determine its future forms and contents. If this turns out to be true, it will be interesting to see if these trends are regarded as desirable or disagreeable by various actors in the field. On the other hand, when we look back at the effects of abundant interference with the Manas epic by various governments, it is clear that despite many changes in form and content, the essence of the Manas epic has remained in tact. Oral performance with a distinct spiritual component was the core of epic narration in Radloff’s days, and remains so for Manaschīs of our time.

## Glossary

### A

<i>Aiil</i> <sup>138</sup> (Kazakh: <i>aul</i> )	Village or settlement
<i>Aitish</i>	Narrating contest
<i>Akkula</i>	Horse of Manas
<i>Akim</i>	Mayor
<i>Akin</i>	Poet
<i>Ak Padisha</i>	White Emperor, i.e. Russian Tsar
<i>Almambet</i>	Best friend of Manas
<i>Arbak</i>	Ancestor spirit
<i>Ash</i>	Memorial feast

### B

<i>Baatir</i>	Hero
<i>Bakai</i>	Advisor of Manas
<i>Bata</i>	Blessing
<i>Bek</i>	19 <sup>th</sup> century term for warrior
<i>Besh barmak</i>	Kyrgyz dish of mutton, bouillon and noodles
<i>Biy</i>	19 <sup>th</sup> century term for judge
<i>Boz-üy</i>	Yurt (round tent made of felt and fir wood)
<i>Buyruk</i>	Demand, the Will of God

### C

<i>Chapan</i>	Robe
<i>Chinigi Manaschi</i>	Real Manaschi, i.e. a Manaschi who has been called to his profession by a vocation dream

---

<sup>138</sup> All words in italics are in Kyrgyz, unless otherwise stated.

*Chong Manaschī* Great Manaschī, i.e. a Manaschī who has been recognised as an authority based on narrating skill, age and knowledge of tales

*Choro* Knight, comrade-in-arms

## D

*Dastargon* Tablecloth, extensive meal for guests

*Dombra* Two-stringed lute, Kazakh national instrument

## E

*Eldik* Folk, ‘of the people’

*Eldüülük* Nationalist

## G

*Glasnost* (Russian) Soviet policy of transparency

Glocalisation Increasing interest in local culture in response to globalisation

*Gümböz* Mausoleum

## İ

*İrchī* Singer

## J

Jadidism 19<sup>th</sup> century Muslim reformist movement within the Russian Empire

*Jailoo* Summer camp in mountain pasture

Jakip Father of Manas

*Jattama Manaschī* Imprint Manaschī, i.e. a Manaschī who learns the words by heart from a book

*Jeen* Maternal cousin

*Jogorku Kengesh* Parliament of Kyrgyzstan, literally: Supreme Council

Joloi Enemy of Manas, hero of Joloi epic

*Jomok* Tale

*Jomokchu* Narrator of tales

## K

<i>Kalpak</i>	Felt hat, Kyrgyz national hat
<i>Kamchi</i>	Whip
<i>Kara söz</i>	Prose (literally: black word)
<i>Kasiet</i>	Sacred power
<i>Kelin</i>	Daughter-in-law
<i>Khagan</i>	Great Khan
<i>Khanikey</i>	Wife of Manas
<i>Kimiz</i>	Fermented mare's milk
<i>Kishtoo</i>	Winter camp in valley
<i>Komuz</i>	Three-stringed lute, Kyrgyz national instrument
<i>Korenizatsia</i> (Russian)	policy of supporting the use of non-Russian languages and the creation of non-Russian elites in the non-Russian territories
<i>Koshoi</i>	Ally of Manas
<i>Koshok</i>	Mourning song
<i>Köz achik</i>	Clairvoyant
<i>Kuda</i>	In-law, wife-giving relative
<i>Kudai</i>	God
<i>Kurama variant</i>	Combined version, 1950s publication of the Manas epic based on versions of various Manaschi's
<i>Kuran</i>	'Reading Kuran', recital of the first <i>sura</i> of the K'uran in Arabic, followed by wishes and requests for help from Kyrgyz ancestors in Kyrgyz
<i>Kushbek</i>	Governor
<i>Küü</i>	Instrumental song
<i>Kyrgyzstani</i>	'Of Kyrgyzstan', denoting the entire population in contrast to the Kyrgyz alone

## M

<i>Majmu-at-Tavarikh</i>	16 <sup>th</sup> century Farsi text featuring Manas
<i>Manas</i>	Hero of the Manas epic
<i>Manaschi</i>	Narrator of the Manas epic
<i>Manap</i>	19 <sup>th</sup> century term for leader of a Kyrgyz clan

<i>Mazar</i>	Holy place
<i>Moldo</i>	Mullah, or more generally: learned person
<b>N</b>	
<i>Natsionalnost</i> (Russian)	Ethnicity
<b>O</b>	
<i>Oblus</i> (Russian: <i>Oblast</i> )	Administrative unit, similar to province
<i>Obshezhitie</i> (Russian)	Tenement
<b>P</b>	
<i>Perestroika</i> (Russian)	Soviet policy of economic reform
<i>Philharmonia</i>	Building of the Philharmonic Orchestra in Bishkek
<b>R</b>	
<i>Rayon</i>	Administrative unit, sub-division of oblus
<b>S</b>	
<i>Samopan</i>	Home-brewn vodka
<i>Sanjira</i>	Genealogy
Seitek	Son of Semetei, grandson of Manas, hero of the Seitek epic
Semetei	Son of Manas, hero of the Semetei epic
<i>Shaar</i>	City
<i>Shirdak</i>	Felt carpet
Som	Currency of independent Kyrgyzstan
<b>T</b>	
<i>Talip</i>	Healer
<i>Tengir</i>	God
<i>Tör</i>	Place for the most respected guest, opposite the door
<i>Töshük</i>	Bed made of blankets

## **U**

<i>Ulut</i>	Ethnic group
<i>Uruk</i>	Sub-clan
<i>Uruu</i>	Tribe or clan; subdivision of the Kyrgyz ethnic group
<i>Uyat</i>	Shame

## **Y**

Yenisey	River in Siberia
---------	------------------



# Bibliography

## Manas versions used and referred to in this study

### Nineteenth century versions

- 1885 *Proben der Volksliteratur der Nördlichen Türkischen Stämme. V. Theil: Der Dialect der Kara-Kirgisen.* W. Radloff. Leipzig, Voss' Sortiment.
- 1977 *The Memorial Feast for Kökötöy-khan (Kökötöydün aşı), A Kirghiz Epic Poem. Edited for the first time from a photocopy of the unique manuscript with translation and commentary by A.T. Hatto.* A. Hatto. Oxford, Oxford UP.
- 1980 *The Manas of Wilhelm Radloff. Re-edited, newly translated and with a commentary by Arthur T. Hatto.* A. Hatto. Wiesbaden, Otto Harrassowitz

### Chapbooks

#### *Manas Serialar:*

- 1940 *Manastin balalik chagi.* Compiler: İ. Abdırakhmanov. Frunze.
- 1941a *Alooke Khan.* Compiler: İ. Abdırakhmanov. Frunze.
- 1941b *Khanikeidin jomogy.* Compiler: İ. Abdırakhmanov. Frunze.
- 1941c *Makel döö.* Compiler: İ. Abdırakhmanov. Frunze.
- 1941d *Manastin ölümi.* Compiler: İ. Abdırakhmanov. Frunze.
- 1941e *Manastagi elester.* Compiler: K. Malikov. Frunze.
- 1941f *Semetei Bukardan Talasga Kelishi.* Compiler: İ. Abdırakhmanov. Frunze.
- 1941g *Ürgönch.* Compiler: İ. Abdırakhmanov. Frunze.
- 1942 *Algachki aikash.* Compiler: J. Beishekeev. Frunze.
- 1943 *Maidan.* Compiler: J. Beishekeev. Frunze.
- 1944 *Birinchi kazat.* Compiler: K. Rakhmatullin. Frunze.
- 1995a *Almambettin jomogu, ('Chong Kazattan' üzündü).* T. Bakchiev. Karakol, Akıl.

### Combined Version

- 1958a *Manas, kurama variant boyuncha. Manas üchiltiginin 1-kitebi.* Compiler: K. Malikov. General editor: B.M. Yunusaliev. Frunze, Kırgızmbas.
- 1958b *Manas, kurama variant boyuncha. Manas üchiltiginin 2-kitebi.* Compiler: K. Malikov. General editor: B.M. Yunusaliev. Frunze, Kırgızmbas.
- 1959 *Semetei, kurama variant boyuncha.* Compiler: A. Tokombaev. General editor: B.M. Yunusaliev. Frunze, Kırgızmbas.
- 1960 *Seitek, kurama variant boyuncha.* Compiler: T. Sıdıkbekov. General editor: B.M. Yunusaliev. Frunze, Kırgızmbas.



### Sagımbai's Version

- 1946 *Manas: Kirgizskiy epos: "Velikiy pokhod"*. Translators S. Lipkin, L. Penkovski, M. Tarlovski. General editor: U. Jakieshev. Moscow, Goslitizdat.
- 1978 *Manas. Sagımbai Orozbek uulunun varianti boyuncha. I-kitep.* Ch. Aitmatov et.al. (eds.) Frunze, Kirgızstan basması.
- 1979 *Manas: Epos/ Sagımbai Orozbek uulunun varianti boyuncha. Kitep II.* Ch. Aitmatov et.al. (eds.) Frunze, Kirgızstan basması.
- 1981 *Manas Epos/ Sagımbai Orozbek uulunun varianti boyuncha. Kitep III.* Ch. Aitmatov et.al. (eds.) Frunze, Kirgızstan basması.
- 1982 *Manas: Epos/ Sagımbai Orozbek uulunun varianti boyuncha. Kitep IV.* Ch. Aitmatov et.al. (eds.) Frunze, Kirgızstan basması.
- 1984a *Manas. Kirgizskii geroicheskii epos. Kniga 1.* A.S. Mirbadaleva, N.V. Kidaish-Pokrovskaya, S. Musaev et.al. (eds.). Moscow, Glavaya Redaktsia Vostochnoi Literatury.
- 1988 *Manas. Kirgizskii geroicheskii epos. Kniga 2.* A.S. Mirbadaleva, N.V. Kidaish-Pokrovskaya, B.M. Yusunaliyev, S. Musaev et.al. (eds.). Moscow, Glavaya Redaktsia Vostochnoi Literatury.
- 1990 *Manas. Kirgizskii geroicheskii epos. Kniga 3.* A.S. Sadıkov, S.M. Musaev, A.S. Mirbadaleva (eds.). Moscow, Glavaya Redaktsia Vostochnoi Literatury.
- 1995b *Manas. Kirgizskii geroicheskii epos. Kniga 4.* A.S. Sadıkov, S.M. Musaev, A.S. Mirbadaleva (eds.). Moscow, Glavaya Redaktsia Vostochnoi Literatury.
- 1995c *Manas: Kirgız elinin baatırdık eposu, Sagımbai Orozbek Uulunun varianti boyuncha. I-kitep.* S. Musaev et.al. (eds.) Bishkek.
- 1995d *Manas: Kirgız elinin baatırdık eposu, Sagımbai Orozbek Uulunun varianti boyuncha. II-kitep.* S. Musaev et.al. (eds.) Bishkek.
- 1995e *Manas: Kirgız elinin baatırdık eposu, Sagımbai Orozbek Uulunun varianti boyuncha. III-kitep.* S. Musaev et.al. (eds.) Bishkek.
- 1995f *Manas. Volume 1. Translated into English by Walter May.* A. Wiget, A. Vashchenko, N. Musina (eds.) Moscow and Bishkek, Publishing House "Door" of AIP.
- 1995g *Manas. Volume 2. Translated into English by Walter May.* A. Wiget, A. Vashchenko, N. Musina (eds.) Moscow and Bishkek, Publishing House "Door" of AIP.

### Sayakbai's Version

- 1984b *Manas: Sayakbai Karala uulunun varianti boyuncha jarık körgön 'Manas' üchiltiginin 1-kitebi.* R. Kidırbaeva and A. Jainakova (eds.) Frunze, Kirgızstan basması.
- 1986 *Manas: Sayakbai Karala uulunun varianti boyuncha jarık körgön 'Manas' üchiltiginin 2-kitebi.* S. Musaev and M. Mukasov (eds.) Frunze, Kirgızstan basması.
- 1987 *Semetei: epos. Sayakbai Karala uulunun varianti boyuncha. 1-kitebi.* J.. Sarıpbekov et.al. (eds.) Frunze, Kirgızstan basması.

- 1989 *Semetei: epos. Sayakbai Karala uulunun varianti boyuncha. 2-kitebi.* J.. Sarıpbekov et.al. (eds.) Frunze, Kırgızstan basması.
- 1991 *Seitek: epos. Sayakbai Karala uulunun varianti boyuncha.* R. Kırbaava et.al. (eds.). Frunze, Kırgızstan basması.
- 1995h *Manas: Kırgız elinin baatır dik eposu, Sayakbai Karalaevdin varianti boyuncha akademialik basılısı. I-kitep.* Bıshkek.
- 2005 The Kyrgyz Epic Manas. Selections translated, introduced and annotated by Elmira Kırüm kulkızı. Published at <http://www.silkroadfoundation.org/folklore/manas/manasintro.html>

## General bibliography

- Abazov R. 1999. Problems of economic transition in the CIS: The case of Kyrgyzstan. *Russian and Euro-Asian Bulletin* 8
- Abramzon SM. 1971. *Kirgizy i ikh etnogeneticheskie i istoriko-kulturnye svyazi*. Leningrad: Izdatelstvo Nauka
- Aitmatov T. 1978. *Abschied von Gülsary, Der weisse Dampfer, Über Literatur*. Berlin: Verlag Volk und Welt
- Aitmatov T. 1980. *Frühe Kraniche*. München: Bertelsmann Verlag GmbH
- Aitmatov T, Ikeda D. 1992. *Begegnung am Fudschijama - Ein Dialog*. Zürich: Unionsverlag
- Akaev A. 2003. *Kyrgyz Statehood and the National Epos 'Manas'*. New York: Global Scholarly Publications
- Akiner S. 1995. *The Formation of Kazakh Identity, From Tribe to Nation-State*. London: Royal Institute of International Affairs
- Akmataliev T, ed. 1996. *Manaschi Mambet Chokmorov (eskerүүлөр)*. Bishkek: Kirgiz Respublikasınin Uluttuk Ilimler Akademiasınin Basmakanası
- Aliev S, Saripbekov R, Matiev K, eds. 1995. *Encyclopaedical Phenomenon of Epos 'Manas', Article Collectiın [sic]*. Bishkek: Glavnaya redaktsia Kirgizskoi Entsiklopedii
- Allworth E, ed. 1974. *The Nationalities Question in Soviet Central Asia*. New York: Praeger Publishers
- Allworth E, ed. 1989. *Central Asia: 120 Years of Russian Rule*. Durham and London: Duke UP
- Amsler S. 2007. *The Politics of Knowledge in Central Asia, Science between Marx and the market*. London and New York: Routledge
- Anderson B. 1986. *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso
- Asankanov AA. 1995. The epos Manas and the development of an ethnic self-consciousness among the Kyrgyz. In *Manas Epos and the World's Epic Heritage*, ed. TK Koichuev et.al. Bishkek: Muras
- Asankanov AA. 1997. *Kirgizi: rost natsionalnogo samosoznaniya*. Bishkek: Muras
- Asankanov AA, Bekmuhamedova N. 1999. *Akyns and Manaschis - Creators and Keepers of the Kyrgyz people spiritual culture*. Bishkek: Muras
- Asankanov AA, Omurbekov TN, eds. 1995. *The Epos 'Manas' is the Unique Masterpiece of the World Cultural Treasury*. Bishkek: Sham
- Asanov Ü, ed. 1998. *Narın Oblusu Entsiklopedia*. Bishkek: Kirgiz Entsiklopediasınin Bashki Redaktsiası
- Atabaki T, Versteeg J. 1994. *Centraal Azië*. Amsterdam: Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen

- Babak V, ed. 2003. *Political Organization in Central Asia and Azerbaijan: Sources and Documents*. London: Frank Cass
- Bakchiev T. 1995. *Almambettin Jomogu ('Chong Kazattan' üzündü)*. Karakol: Karakol Basmakanası
- Bakchiev T. 2000. The mysticism of Manas recital.
- Barfield TJ. 1989. *The Perilous Frontier. Nomadic Empires and China*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell
- Barthold VV. 1956. *Four studies on the history of Central Asia. I. A short history of Turkestan. History of the Semirechyé*. Leiden: Brill
- Bauman R, Briggs CL. 1990. Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19: 59-88
- Beissinger M, Tylus J, Wofford S, eds. 1999. *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World, the Poetics of Community*. Berkely: University of California Press
- Bennigsen AA. 1953. Les peuples musulmans de l'U.R.S.S. et les Soviets: II. Le conflit culturel. *L'Afrique et L'Asie* 21: 13-30
- Bennigsen AA. 1975. The Crisis of the Turkic National Epics 1951-1952: local nationalism or internationalism? *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 17: 463-74
- Bohr A, Crisp S. 1996. Kyrgyzstan and the Kyrgyz. In *The Nationalities question in the post-Soviet states*, ed. G Smith. London and New York: Longman
- Bowra CM. 1952. *Heroic Poetry*. London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd
- Brill Olcott M. 1987. *The Kazakhs*. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press
- Brubaker R. 1996. *Nationalism Reframed, Nationhood and the national question in the New Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP
- Carrère d'Encausse H. 1989. The Fall of the Czarist Empire. In *Central Asia: 120 years of Russian Rule*, ed. E Allworth. Durham and London: Duke UP
- Chadwick NK, Zhirmunsky V. 1969. *Oral Epics of Central Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP
- Chapman M. 1978. *The Gaelic Vision in Scottish Culture*. London: Croom Helm
- Chokan. 1966. Chokan Chingisovich Valikhanov, 1835-1865. *Central Asian Review* XIV: 25-31
- Cohen AP. 1982. *Belonging: identity and social organisation in British rural cultures*. Manchester: Manchester UP
- Cohen AP. 1985. *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. London: Tavistock Publications
- Döblin A. 1961. *Manas Epische Dichtung*. Olten: Beim Walter-Verlag
- Dragt H, de Vries J. 1973. *De Sovjet-Unie*. Amsterdam: Meulenhoff Educatief
- Edwards M. 2002. Central Asia Unveiled. *National Geographic*: 108-25

- Entertainment. 1964. Entertainment in Frunze 1963-1964. *Central Asian Review* XII: 280-92
- Hamayon RN. 1998. Shamanism, Buddhism and epic hero-ism: which supports the identity of the post-Soviet Buryats? *Central Asian Survey* 17: 51-97
- Hamayon RN. 2004. The dynamics of the epic genre in Buryat culture. In *Epic Adventures: heroic narrative in the oral performance traditions of four continents*, ed. JHM Jansen. Münster: LIT
- Hambly G, et. al. 1966. Central Asia. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Bücherei KG
- Hatto AT. 1968. The Birth of Manas, a confrontation of two branches of heroic epic poetry in Kirgiz. *Asia Major* XIV: 217-41
- Hatto AT. 1970. *Shamanism and epic poetry in Northern Asia*. London: SOAS
- Hatto AT. 1977. *The Memorial Feast for Kökötöy-Khan (Kökötöydün ası). A Kirghiz Epic Poem*. Oxford: Oxford UP
- Hatto AT. 1979. Plot and Character in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Kirghiz Epic. *Asiatische Forschungen* Band 68, Die Mongolischen Epen, Bezüge, Sinndeutung und Überlieferung
- Hatto AT, ed. 1980. *Traditions of Heroic and Epic Poetry*, Vols. one: The Traditions. London: The Modern Humanities Research Association
- Hatto AT. 1980. The marriage, death and return to life of Manas: a Kirghiz epic poem of the mid-nineteenth century. *Turcica, Revue d'études Turques* XII: 66-94
- Hatto AT. 1990. *The Manas of Wilhelm Radloff*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz
- Heide N van der. 1999. The Last Manaschi, a contradiction in terms. In *The Nature of University Education and Research*, pp. 79-84. Bishkek: American University in Kyrgyzstan
- Heide N van der. 2004. Epic as arena - Models of statehood and the Kyrgyz Manas epic. In *Epic Adventures, Heroic narrative in the oral performance traditions of four continents*, ed. JHM Jansen. Münster: LIT Verlag
- Heide N van der. 2007. Akırkı Manaschi. *Kirgiz Adabiyatı (Kirgiz uluttuk jazuuchular geziti)* No 7: 11-3
- Herzen T, ed. 2000. *Theodor Herzen*. Göttingen: Der Göttinger Arbeitskreis
- Herzfeld M. 2003. *The body impolitic: artisans and artifice in the global hierarchy of value*. Chicago: Chicago UP
- Humphrey C. 2002. 'Eurasia', ideology and the political imagination in provincial Russia. In *Postsocialism, Ideals, ideologies and practices in Eurasia*, ed. CM Hann. London: Routledge
- Huskey G. 1993. Kyrgyzstan: the politics of demographic and economic frustration. In *Nations and Politics in the Soviet Successor States*, ed. I Bremmer and R Taras. Cambridge: Cambridge UP
- Huskey G. 1995. The Politics of Language in Kyrgyzstan. *Nationalities Papers* 23: 549-72

- Hyman A. 1993. Moving out of Moscow's orbit: the outlook for Central Asia. *International Affairs* 69: 289-304
- Imart G, Dor R. 1982. *Le chardon dechiqueté (être kirghiz au 20ème siècle)*: Université de Provence: Service des Publications
- Isakov B. 1997. *Manastin Jeti Osuyati*. Bishkek: Uchkun
- Jansen J, Maier H, eds. 2004. *Epic Adventures, Heroic narrative in the oral performance of four continents*. Münster: LIT Verlag
- Kariipkulov A, ed. 1995. *Manas Entsiklopedia*, Vols. I. Bishkek: Muras
- Kariipkulov A, ed. 1995. *Manas Entsiklopedia*, Vols. II. Bishkek: Muras
- Khalid A. 1998. *The politics of Muslim cultural reform: Jadidism in Central Asia*. London: University of California Press, Ltd.
- Kleinbach R, Ablezova M, Aitieva M. 2005. Kidnapping for marriage (*ala kachuu*) in a Kyrgyz village. *Central Asian Survey* 24: 191-202
- Koichuev TK et.al., ed. 1995. *'Manas' Epos and the World's Epic Heritage, Theses of the international scientific symposium devoted to the 'Manas' epos millennial anniversary*. Bishkek: Muras
- Korth B. 2005. *Language Attitudes towards Kyrgyz and Russian. Discourse, education and policy in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan*. Bern: Peter Lang AG
- Krader L. 1963. *Peoples of Central Asia*. Indiana: Indiana University
- Kumskova NV. 1995. The role of epic tradition in the development of Kyrgyz art. In *Manas Epos and the World's Epic Heritage*, ed. TK Koichuev et.al. Bishkek: Muras
- Kwanten L. 1979. *Imperial Nomads, A History of Central Asia, 500-1500*. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press
- Leeuwen van C, Emeljanenko T, Popova L. 1994. *Nomads in Central Asia, Animal husbandry and culture in transition (19th-20th century)*. Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute
- Lipkin S. 1994. Bucharin, Stalin und der Manas. Skandal um ein Kirgisches Epos. *Die Neue Rundschau* 3: 95-109
- Lord AB. 2000. *The Singer of Tales*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP
- Lutgendorf P. 1991. *The Life of a Text, performing the Ramcaritmanas of Tulsidas*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press
- Maier H. 2004. An epik that never was an epic - the Malay Hikayat Hang Tuah. In *Epic Adventures, Heroic Narrative in the Oral Performance Traditions of Four Continents*, ed. JJH Maier. New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers
- Mambetakunov K. 1995. *Aiköl Manas*. Bishkek: Kirgizstan basması
- Martin T. 2001. *The Affirmative Action Empire, Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP

- Megoran N. 2001. *The Borders of Eternal Friendship? The politics and pain of nationalism and identity along the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan Ferghana Valley Boundary, 1999-2000.* Cambridge
- Merriam AP. 1964. *The Anthropology of Music.* Evanston: Northwestern UP
- Mokrynin V, Ploskikh V. 1995. *Istoria Kirgizstana.* Bishkek: Kirgizstan
- Mozur JP. 1995. *Parables from the Past, the Prose Fiction of Chingiz Aitmatov.* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press
- Murray Matly I. 1989. The Population and the Land. In *Central Asia: 120 years of Russian rule*, ed. E Allworth. Durham and London: Duke UP
- Musaev S. 1994. *Epos 'Manas', nauchno-populyarniy ocherk. The Epos 'Manas', scientific-popular essay. Das Epos 'Manas', popular-wissenschaftlicher Essay.* Bishkek: Sham
- Niles JD. 1999. *Homo Narrans, the poetics and anthropology of oral literature.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press
- Oinas FJ. 1973. Folklore and Politics in the Soviet Union. *Slavic Review* 32: 45-58
- Parry A, ed. 1971. *The making of Homeric Verse, the collected papers of Milman Parry.* Oxford: Clarendon Press
- Pelkmans M. 2007. 'Culture' as a tool and an obstacle: missionary encounters in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.):* 881-99
- Pierce R, ed. 1964. *Mission to Turkestan Being the memoirs of Count K.K. Pahlen 1908-1909.* London: Oxford UP
- Prior D. 1994. *Bishkek Handbook, Inside and out.* Bishkek: Literary Kyrgyzstan
- Prior D, ed. 1995. *Manas, the epic vision of Theodor Herzen.* Bishkek: Akcent Information Agency
- Prior D. 1996. Bibliographic handbook of Kirghiz epic studies.
- Prior D. 1998. Bok-murun's Itinerary Ridden: report on an expedition through Kirghiz epic geography. *Central Asiatic Journal* 42: 238-82
- Prior D. 2000. *Patron, Party, Patrimony. Notes on the cultural history of the Kirghiz epic tradition.* Bloomington: Indiana University
- Prior D. 2002. *The Twilight Age of the Kirghiz Epic Tradition.* Indiana
- Prior D. 2006. Heroes, Chieftains, and the Roots of Kirghiz Nationalism. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 6: 71-88
- Privratsky BG. 2001. *Muslim Turkistan: Kazak religion and collective memory.* Richmond: Curzon
- Radloff W. 1885. *Proben der Volkslitteratur der Nördlichen Türkischen Stämme. V. Theil: Der Dialect der Kara-Kirgisen.* St. Petersburg, Leipzig: Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften
- Radloff W. 1893. *Aus Siberien, losse Blätter aus meinem Tagebuche.* Leipzig: Weigel

- Rakhmatullin K. 1995. Plot peculiarities of 'Manas' versions. In *Encyclopaedical Phenomenon of Epos 'Manas': Articles Collectiın [sic]*, ed. RS Aliev. S, K. Matiev. Bishkek: Glavnaya redaktsia Kırğızskoi Entsiklopedii
- Rakowska-Harmstone T. 1970. *Russia and nationalism in Central Asia: The case of Tadzhikistan*. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins Press
- Rashid A. 1994. *The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or Nationalism?* Karachi: Oxford UP
- Robertson R. 1995. Glocalization: Time-space and homogeneity-heterogeneity. In *Global modernities*, eds. M Featherstone, S Lash, R Robertson. pp. 25-44. London: Sage
- Rud LA, ed. 1999. *Askar Akaev, the first president of the Kyrgyz republic*. Ankara: Turkish International Cooperation Agency
- Ruijter de A. 2000. *De Multiculturele Arena*. Tilburg: Katholieke Universiteit Brabant
- Semenov PP. 1998. *Travels in the Tien'-Shan' 1856-1857*. London: The Hakluyt Society
- Shahrani NM. 1979. *The Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan, adaptation to closed frontiers*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press
- Shoolbraid GMH. 1975. *The Oral Epic of Siberia and Central Asia*. Bloomington: Indiana University
- Slezkine Y. 1994. The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or how a socialist state promoted ethnic particularism. *Slavic Review* 53: 414-52
- Smith G. 1990. *The Nationalities Question in the Soviet Union, part IV: Muslim Central Asia*. London and New York: Longman
- Smith JD. 1977. The Singer or the Song? A Reassessment of Lord's 'Oral Theory'. *Man, new series* 12: 141-53
- Stalin JW. 1948. *Het Marxisme en het Nationale Vraagstuk*. Amsterdam: Pegasus
- Stepanyuk BP. 1995. The "Manas" epos and Kyrgyz poetry. In *Manas Epos and the World's Epic Heritage*, ed. TK Koichuev et al. Bishkek: Muras
- Tishkov V. 1995. 'Don't Kill Me, I'm Kyrgyz!', an anthropological analysis of violence in the Osh ethnic conflict. *Journal of Peace Research* 32: 133-49
- Tishkov V. 1997. *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict In and After the Soviet Union, The Mind Aflame*. London: SAGE Publications
- Törökán uulu E. 1995. *Kırğızdın Kiskacha Sanjırası, 1-tom*. Bishkek: Uchkun
- Törökán uulu E. 1995. *Kırğızdın Kiskacha Sanjırası, 2-tom*. Bishkek: Uchkun
- Valikhanov C. 1972. *Sobranie sochinenii v pyati tomach, tom V, graficheckoe nasledie/ bes tomdik shıgarmalar jinagı, V tom, grafikalik muralar*. Alma-ata: Izdatelstvo Nauka Kazakhskoi SSR
- Voortter T. 1999. *Kyrgyz Heroes, Songs of sanjyra and tales of batyrlar*. Amsterdam



Yudakhin KK. 1965. *Kirgizsko-Russkiy Slovar*. Moscow: Izdatelstvo Sovyetskaya Entsiklopedia

Zhen-hua H, Imart G. 1989. *A Kirghiz Reader*. Bloomington: Indiana University

## Samenvatting

# Bezielde Vertelling - het Manas epos en de samenleving in Kirgizstan

### Inleiding

Het Manas epos, een mondeling overgeleverd heldendicht dat vertelt over het leven van Manas, is buiten Kirgizstan weinig bekend. Zeventig jaar lang was dat te wijten aan de ontoegankelijkheid van de Sovjetunie. Maar ook na het uiteenvallen van de Sovjetunie en het openstellen van de grenzen in 1991 is wetenschappelijke interesse in het Manas epos uiterst beperkt gebleven. Dat is merkwaardig te noemen, aangezien het Manas epos een aantal bijzonder interessante kenmerken heeft.

Ten eerste wordt het Manas epos, dat het levensverhaal van de waarschijnlijk fictionele held Manas vertelt, mondeling overgeleverd binnen het kader van een levende orale traditie. Tot op de dag van vandaag is er een groep van Manasvertellers, *Manaschī* genaamd, die het epos op verschillende gelegenheden en op zeer indrukwekkende wijze reciteren. Ten tweede is het Manas epos een buitengewoon lang verhaal. Kirgiezen vertellen vaak trots dat het Manas epos, met meer dan een half miljoen verzen, langer is dan de Odyssee en de Ilias tezamen. Aangezien Manasvertellers het verhaal niet uit hun hoofd leren maar improviserend vertellen, en daarbij iedere Manaschī een eigen versie kent, is het passender om, net als Manaschīs, te zeggen dat het Manas epos oneindig is. Een derde interessant kenmerk van het Manas epos is dat het Manaschīs en hun publiek onlosmakelijk verbonden is met een beleving van contact met het bovennatuurlijke. Manaschīs worden in een droom geroepen door de geesten (*arbaktar*) van Manas en zijn metgezellen. Gedurende hun carrière als Manaschī blijven zij dromen en visioenen houden. Tijdens een vertelling ervaren veel luisteraars de aanwezigheid van een bovennatuurlijke energie.

Ten vierde is het Manas epos interessant vanwege zijn politieke betekenis. In de negentiende eeuw gaf een goede Manasvertelling status aan de Kirgizische leider die de

voorstelling georganiseerd had. Tijdens de Sovjettijd kreeg het Manas epos een rol toebedeeld bij de constructie van een Kirgizische nationale identiteit. In de Sovjetunie werd gepoogd het ‘nationale vraagstuk’, dat in feite het spanningsveld tussen de nationale - en de klassensolidariteit besloeg, op te lossen door de bevolking op te delen in een groot aantal zeer duidelijk omliggende etnische groepen die elk een eigen territorium, een nationale taal en een uitgebreid arsenaal aan nationale symbolen toegewezen kregen. Dit moest de niet-Russische bevolking verbinden aan het communistische project en de Sovjetstaat behoeden voor de kolonialistische houding van het voormalig Tsaristische rijk. Echter, zodra deze verstevigde nationale identiteit een gevaar vormde voor de solidariteit aan de Sovjetunie werd het bestempeld als ‘bourgeois nationalistisch’, en werd er hard opgetreden. Deze complexe dynamiek speelde vooral in de eerste dertig jaren van het Sovjettijdperk. In de latere jaren wisten Manasvertellers en Manaswetenschappers voorzichtig te manoeuvreren binnen de langzaam ontstaan ruimte voor het publiceren van ongecensureerde versies van het epos. Na de onafhankelijkheid van de Sovjetunie kreeg het Manas epos een geheel nieuwe rol. Het epos werd ingezet als nationaal symbool en gepropageerd als de basis voor nieuwe ideologische richtlijnen. Het Manas epos moest het ideologisch vacuüm opvullen dat was ontstaan na het wegvallen van het Marxisme-Leninisme.

Het Manas epos is daarmee een boeiend onderwerp van studie voor wetenschappers uit uiteenlopende disciplines. In deze studie richt ik mij op de sociale betekenis van het Manas epos in Kirgizstan vanuit het perspectief van de betrokkenen zelf. Ik beschrijf hoe Manaschi's, Manaswetenschappers, politici en het publiek betekenis toekennen aan het Manas epos, en hoe zij die betekenissen uit weten te dragen om daarmee de sociale betekenis van het Manas epos vorm te geven. Ik richt mij hierbij op drie uitingvormen van het Manas epos: de mondelinge vertelling, de publicatie van geschreven Manasverhalen en de politieke retoriek die is gebaseerd op het Manas epos. Deze drie uitingvormen zet ik in een historisch perspectief, waarbij ik drie perioden onderscheid: de periode voor, de periode tijdens en de periode na de Sovjetunie.

## **Hoofdstuk 1 Kirgizstan, opvallend onbekend**

Kirgizstan is voor velen een onbekend land. Deze voormalige Sovjetrepubliek ligt in Centraal Azië en grenst aan Kazakstan, Oezbekistan, Tadzjikistan en China. Kirgizstan bevindt zich op twee uitlopers van het Himalaya-gebergte, waardoor negentig procent van het land boven de 1.500 meter ligt. Het wordt bevolkt door vijf miljoen bewoners met

diverse etnische achtergrond. In de census van 1999 gaf 65% van de bevolking aan Kirgizisch te zijn, 13% noemde zich Russisch en 14% Oezbeeks. Daarnaast werden meer dan tachtig andere etnische identiteiten opgegeven en geaccepteerd. Islam is de meest voorkomende religie onder Kirgiezen en Oezbeken. De meeste Russen zijn Russisch Orthodox. Islam in Kirgizstan is doorspekt met het geloof in de kracht van de natuur en contact met de geesten van overledenen. Het Kirgizisch, een Turkse taal, is de staatstaal. Russisch is erkend als officiële taal. De verhouding tussen het gebruik van deze twee talen speelt een belangrijke rol in interetnische positionering.

Kirgizstan is als land met eigen grenzen ontstaan in de vroege Sovjetjaren tijdens het proces van de ‘nationale afbakening’. Volgens sommige historici komen de Kirgiezen oorspronkelijk uit een gebied in Siberië, aan de bron van de Yennisei rivier. In de vijftiende eeuw zouden zij naar hun huidige territorium zijn gemigreerd. De verschillende stammen (*uruu*) werden elk door een eigen leider bestuurd, die in de loop der tijd onder het bestuur van verschillende rijken vielen. In de 50-er jaren van de negentiende eeuw werd een gedeelte van de Kirgizische stammen in het Russische rijk ingelijfd, terwijl zuidelijke stammen ondergeschikt waren aan het Kokhand kanaat en een oostelijke stam onder Chinees bestuur viel. Rond 1880 waren alle Kirgizische stammen ondergebracht in het Russische keizerrijk. De Grote Socialistische Oktober Revolutie in 1917 leidde, na een aantal jaren van burgeroorlog, tot de indeling van Centraal Azië in vijf nationale territoria, waaronder de Kirgizische Autonome Regio. In 1936 werd Kirgizstan een Socialistische Sovjet Republiek. Deze status had tot gevolg dat Kirgizstan automatisch onafhankelijk werd toen de Sovjetunie uiteenviel.

De economie van Kirgizstan draait voornamelijk op veeteelt. Van oudsher waren de Kirgiezen transhumance nomaden die hun kuddes van schapen, paarden, geiten en kamelen in de zomer naar hooggelegen zomerweiden brachten. In de winter woonden zij met hun joerts (ronde vilten tenten) in lager gelegen kampen. Tegenwoordig wonen de meeste rurale Kirgiezen in huizen en brengt een aantal herdersfamilies alle kuddes uit een dorp naar de zomerweiden. In de Sovjettijd was de veeteelt gecollectiviseerd, maar na de onafhankelijkheid werd deze geprivatiseerd. Naast veeteelt worden er in daarvoor geschikte gebieden verschillende gewassen verbouwd. In Kirgizstan is geen aardolie of gas aanwezig, maar de bergen kennen wel vele andere bodemschatten in de vorm van mineralen en edelmetalen. Hiervan wordt nog weinig geëxploiteerd, met uitzondering van goud, dat wordt gewonnen door een Canadese goudmaatschappij in samenwerking met de Kirgizische overheid.

Het uiteenvallen van de Sovjetunie was rampzalig voor de Kirgizische economie en het besteedbare inkomen van de bevolking. De regering van president Askar Akayev zette in op buitenlandse investeringen en hulp om te kunnen overleven. Hiervoor werd de *shock therapy* methode van het IMF en de Wereldbank doorgevoerd, die het economische leven van gewone burgers echter negatief beïnvloedde. President Akayev werd steeds vaker beschuldigd van corruptie en het verhinderen van eerlijke verkiezingen, en in 2005 werd hij afgezet in de zogeheten Tulpenrevolutie. Hij werd opgevolgd door zijn voormalige premier Kurmanbek Bakiyev. Al snel bleek dat Bakiyev weinig vaart zette achter zijn beloofde hervormingen, en er wordt regelmatig tegen zijn beleid geïnteressaard.

## **Hoofdstuk 2 De orale vertelling van het Manas epos**

Manasvertellers reciteren het epos in verschillende melodieën van zeven of acht lettergrepen. Hierbij maken zij gebruik van alliteratie en eindrijm. Handbewegingen en uithalen in de stem zorgen voor extra dynamiek.

In 1995 werd het duizendjarig bestaan van het Manas epos gevierd. Dit symbolische getal is gebaseerd op berekeningen door Manaswetenschappers die de episode van de Grote Veldtocht uit het epos hebben gekoppeld aan een historische gebeurtenis, te weten de overwinning in 840 AD op de Oeigoeren door een groep die als voorouders van de Kirgiezen wordt gezien. In veel versies van het epos sterft Manas bij terugkeer van de Grote Mars. Volgens de mondelinge overlevering is het epos voortgekomen uit het rouwlied voor Manas dat werd gezongen door zijn minstreel *İrchī-uul*. Van generatie op generatie werd dit rouwlied overgedragen en uitgebouwd tot een lang en indrukwekkend epos. Er zijn legendes over een Manasverteller uit de veertiende en één uit de achttiende eeuw. Vanaf de negentiende eeuw zijn er meerdere Manasvertellers bekend. De eerste geschreven bronnen over Manasvertellers komen van ontdekkingsreizigers Chokan Valikhanov en Wilhelm Radloff, die tussen 1854 en 1869 Manasvertellingen opschreven. In de Sovjettijd werd de term *Manaschī* geïntroduceerd. Voor die tijd werden Manasvertellers *jomokchu* (*jomok* = verhaal) genoemd. Twee Manaschīs werden in de Sovjettijd tot iconen verheven en worden ook nu nog als de grootste Manaschīs gezien. Dit zijn Sagımbai Orozbekov (1867-1930) en Sayakbai Karalaev (1894-1971). In 1995 werden op het 'Manas 1000' festival drie Manaschīs uitgeroepen tot Grote Manaschīs, te weten Seidene Moldokova (1922), Kaba Atabekov (1926) en Shaabai Azizov (1927-2004). Er hebben echter altijd naast de grote namen veel meer Manaschīs bestaan, en ook tegenwoordig zijn er in Kirgizstan vele Manaschīs. Tijdens mijn veldwerk heb ik

samengewerkt met de Grote Manaschī Kaba Atabekov, de jonge Manaschī Talantaali Bakchiev (1971) en de vrouwelijke Manaschī Kaniimbübü Ambraimova.

Er is sprake van twee soorten Manaschīs, ook al wordt dit onderscheid niet vaak expliciet herkend. Ten eerste zijn er de *jattama* Manaschīs, Manaschīs die het verhaal uit een boek uit het hoofd hebben geleerd. Daarnaast zijn er de *chīnīgī* Manaschī, de ‘echte’ Manaschīs. Zij improviseren ter plekke en baseren hun verhaal op wat zij zelf in dromen en visioenen gezien hebben. Echte Manaschīs worden tot hun professie geroepen in een speciale roepingsdroom. Deze droom krijgen zij meestal op jonge leeftijd. Een aantal elementen komt terug in bijna elke roepingsdroom: de dromer ontmoet de geest (*arbak*) van de vrouw, de moeder, de raadsman of een ridder van Manas die de dromer iets te eten en te drinken aanbiedt. De geest zegt dan dat de dromer het Manasverhaal moet gaan vertellen, en dat hij (of zij) blind of kreupel zal worden als hij niet gehoorzaamt. De geest brengt de dromer daarna naar een plek waar zich een episode uit het Manasverhaal aan het afspelen is. Manaschīs vertellen dat zij onmiddellijk na de droom een sterke behoefte hebben om te reciteren, en dat de woorden uit hun mond vloeien. Vaak volgt een periode van verlegenheid of onwetendheid, waardoor de toekomstige Manaschī niet verder gaat met zijn roeping. Als hij in contact wordt gebracht met een ervaren Manaschī leert de aspirant de gedragsregels rondom het vertellen en begint een carrière als Manasverteller. Het contact met de Geest van Manas blijft bestaan en komt tot uiting in dromen en visioenen. Over instructie en oefenen in de kunst van het vertellen zelf is door mijn informanten met geen woord gerept. Het idee dat een Manaschī als vanzelf kan reciteren vanwege het contact met de Geest van Manas lijkt een taboe te plaatsen op het spreken over een leerproces dat inspanning vergt.

Westerse wetenschappers zijn tot nu toe aan de rol van de roepingsdroom voorbijgegaan. Zij laten het onderwerp ongemoeid, of doen het af als een ‘claim’ waar Manaschīs zich achter konden verschuilen tijdens het wispelturige Sovjetbewind. Ook Kirgizische wetenschappers nemen afstand van het geloof in contact met de geesteswereld en verklaren de droom in instrumentele en psychologische termen. Hiermee kiezen zij voor een andere kennistraditie dan die van waaruit Manaschīs de dromen verklaren, hetgeen hen een zekere superioriteit verleent, zowel binnen als buiten academische kringen. Voor Manaschīs is het contact met Manas echter reëel en in die hoedanigheid beïnvloeden zij hun beleving van het Manas epos. Het geeft hen de motivatie om te blijven reciteren, ondanks een soms gebrekkige interesse in hun omgeving. Naast deze positieve stimulans is er angst voor de toorn van Manas, en worden er vele verhalen verteld van Manaschīs en

anderen die ziek of waanzinnig zijn geworden of zelfs zijn omgekomen nadat zij het epos verkeerd behandelden. Ook wordt de aanwezigheid van de geesten aangewend als verklaring voor de fysieke verschijnselen die optreden bij verteller en luisteraars. John D. Niles heeft deze verschijnselen ‘somatische communicatie’ genoemd. Het geconcentreerde opgaan in het verhaal zorgt voor kippenvel, tranen en rillingen. Bij Manasvertellingen worden ook de genezing van ziekten en onvruchtbaarheid toegeschreven aan de energie (*kasiet*) van het epos.

Manaschīs ontwikkelen elk hun eigen versie van het epos. Dit is niet alleen een onvermijdelijk gevolg van improviserend vertellen, maar is zelfs van belang voor het verwerven van de status van Echte, en uiteindelijk Grote, Manaschī. Verschillen tussen vertellingen kunnen groot zijn. Zo vertelt Sagimbai over Manas’ pelgrimage naar Mekka, maar Kaba en Talantaalī ontkenden dat Manas ooit naar Mekka is geweest. Voor Manaschīs is dit geen enkel probleem. Talantaalī legde mij uit dat tijdens een vertelling een staat van fantasie optreedt waarin mens en natuur één zijn. Elke verteller geeft andere woorden aan die ervaring van fantasie, waardoor verschillende versies kunnen ontstaan.

Er wordt vaak beweerd dat Manaschīs met veel respect behandeld worden, maar in de praktijk varieert dit aanzienlijk. Ik heb vertellingen bijgewoond waar het publiek zelfs geen beleefde interesse opbracht, terwijl op een ander moment eenzelfde soort publiek zich door dezelfde verteller diep liet raken. Ook al valt Manaschīs vaak lof ten deel, financiële beloningen blijven meestal uit. Naast de ceremoniële geschenken als jas, hoed en zweep ontvangen Manaschīs meestal niets in ruil voor een vertelling. Het is voor Manasvertellers dan ook moeilijk een inkomen met hun beroep te verkrijgen, en zij werken naast het vertellen als genezer, boer, schapenherder of docent.

Het publiek heeft op verschillende manieren toegang tot Manasvertellingen. Op sociale gelegenheden wordt soms opgetreden door een Manaschī, op televisie en radio worden regelmatig Manasvertellingen uitgezonden, op school leren kinderen stukken van het epos uit hun hoofd die zij reciteren tijdens zogenaamde Open Lessen, in theaters vormen Manasvertellingen vaak onderdeel van folkloristische voorstellingen, en georganiseerde Manaschī-competities zijn publiekelijk toegankelijk. Volgens Kaba is de interesse in Manasvertellingen toegenomen na de onafhankelijkheid, maar Talantaalī klaagt dat er te weinig gelegenheden zijn voor een Manaschī om op te treden.

Een veelgehoorde bewering is dat het vertellen van het Manas epos aan het uitsterven is. Er zijn verscheidene documentaires met de naam ‘De Laatste Manaschī’ – die overigens over verschillende Manaschīs gaan. UNESCO heeft de kunst van Kirgizische

epische vertellers, waaronder het Manas epos, op de lijst van Immaterieel Cultureel Erfgoed gezet om het te ‘beschermen’ en ‘revitaliseren’. Ook in Kirgizstan hoort men regelmatig de vraag of er wel een nieuwe generatie Manaschïs zal komen. Het is echter overduidelijk dat de traditie van het Manasvertellen springlevend is. Er zijn zeer veel Manaschïs in alle delen van Kirgizstan en van alle generaties, zowel geroepen Manaschïs als individuen die stukken uit een boek uit het hoofd leren. Toch is het idee dat een epische vertelling in de moderne tijd niet kan overleven zo sterk aanwezig dat velen voorbij gaan aan de overduidelijke vitaliteit van de traditie.

In de sociale wetenschappen is al vaker aangetoond dat culturele elementen juist in de moderne tijd een ‘cultureel reveil’ doormaken. Waar globalisering leidt tot schaalvergroting ontstaat een behoefte aan thuishoren in een lokale gemeenschap. Daarnaast worden culturele symbolen handelswaar door hun onderscheidende en exotische uitstraling. Ook het Manas epos wordt ingezet als cultureel symbool in de globale arena en dient als bewijs dat het Kirgizische volk een oude en waardige cultuur kent. Hiermee worden fondsen gegenereerd om het Manas epos te behouden. Indirect draagt het epos bij aan het beeld van Kirgizstan als een aantrekkelijk land voor hulp en investeringen.

Waar deze heroplevingen van culturele elementen vaak hebben geleid tot een musealisering en een onderwerping aan een ‘*global hierarchy of value*’ is de vertelling van het Manas epos levend gebleven in een vorm die door de Manasvertellers als waarachtig wordt gezien. Het is waarschijnlijk dat het spirituele element van het Manas epos hiertoe heeft bijgedragen. Het geloof in een opdracht van de Geest van Manas levert een diepgewortelde motivatie bij Manasvertellers die voorbij gaat aan directe waardering vanuit de omgeving.

### **Hoofdstuk 3 Het Manas epos gepubliceerd**

Naast de orale traditie bestaat een uitgebreid repertoire aan Manasboeken. De opkomst van wijdverbreide geletterdheid, tezamen met nieuwe ideeën over beschaving, creëerden de vraag naar geschreven Manasteksten. Deze geschreven versies leidden op hun beurt tot een herdefiniëring van het Manas epos als een gefixeerde tekst, wat grote gevolgen had voor de politieke dimensies van het epos.

De oudste tekst waarin Manas voorkomt is de *Majmu-at-Tavarikh*, een zestiende-eeuwse geschiedschrijving in een Perzische taal waarin Manas wordt gepresenteerd als een historische figuur. Over het bestaan van een epos wordt niet gesproken. In 1856 schrijft de Kazakse prins en ontdekkingsreiziger in Russische dienst Chokan Valikhanov in zijn



dagboek over zijn ontmoeting met een Kirgizische verteller. Ook tekent hij een episode uit het Manasverhaal op: 'Het Herdenkingsfeest voor Kökötöi Khan'. In 1862 en 1869 reist de Duitse ontdekkingsreiziger Wilhelm Radloff in Kirgizische gebieden op zoek naar volksliteratuur, waarbij hij een aantal vertellingen over Manas noteert. Radloff geeft zeer accurate beschrijvingen van de kunst van het reciteren, en zijn inzichten geven Milman Parry de aanzet tot het ontwikkelen van diens beroemde oraal-formulaïsche hypothese waarin het gebruik van bepaalde standaard uitdrukkingen (formules) centraal staat.

In de twintiger jaren van de twintigste eeuw begon een groep volksliteratuurverzamelaars met een Jadidistische achtergrond, ook wel 'Nieuwe Turken' genoemd, Manasversies op te tekenen. Kayum Miftakov richtte in 1922 een kleine kring van verzamelaars van Kirgizische volksliteratuur op. Van de vele epische dichten die de leden van deze kring verzamelden was de bijna complete versie van het Manas epos verteld door Sagımbai Orozbekov de belangrijkste. Tussen 1922 en 1926 hielden Sagımbai en Miftakov, die al snel werd opgevolgd door de Kirgizische İbırayım Abdırakhmanov, lange Manassessies. Sagımbai's gebrekkige gezondheid zorgde voor het beëindigen van de samenwerking, maar Abdırakhmanov ging verder met het optekenen van Manasverhalen van andere Manaschıs. In de veertiger jaren werden zijn verzamelde verhalen gepubliceerd in de Manas Series, in goedkope volksboekedities.

Tegen deze tijd was de Sovjetregering zich al lang met het verzamelen en publiceren van Manasteksten gaan bemoeien. Tot 1934 liet zij folkloreverzamelaars met rust, maar na een toespraak van de beroemde schrijver Maxim Gorki, die folklore prees als 'de uitdrukking van de diepste morele aspiraties van de massa', kreeg folklore de status van een belangrijk instrument in het verstevigen van de positie van het communisme. Er werd een Manaschı aangenomen bij de Filharmonie, er werd een opera over Manas gecomponeerd en er kwam een opdracht om het Manas epos naar het Russisch te vertalen.

De vertaling van Sagımbai's episode van 'de Grote Veldtocht' door Semjon Lipkin, Mark Tarlovski en Lev Penkovski had echter heel wat voeten in aarde. Epische vertellingen waren dan wel geclassificeerd als volkskunst, de inhoud van de verhalen kwam vaak gevaarlijk dicht bij wat als 'bourgeois nationalisme' werd bestempeld. In de tijd van de Stalinistische zuiveringen was het werken met epen dan ook spelen met vuur. Veel van de politici die vertaler Lipkin ontmoette tijdens het vertaalproces waren geëxecuteerd voor het boek uitkwam.

In de vroege jaren veertig heerste er tijdelijk een toleranter beleid ten opzichte van lokale cultuur, omdat Stalin de niet-Russische bevolking gemotiveerd wilde houden voor

de Grote Patriottistische Oorlog. In deze tijd kon Abdīrakhmanov zijn volksboekedities van Manasverhalen uitbrengen. Niet lang na de oorlog stak de kritiek op volksepen echter weer de kop op. Dit leidde tot wat Alexandre Bennigsen ‘de Crisis van de Turkse Epen’ heeft genoemd. In 1951 en 1952 werden alle Turkse epen veroordeeld als zijnde nationalistisch, feodaal-klerikaal, pan-Turks en panislamistisch. Ook het Manas epos kwam onder vuur. Er werd een grote conferentie belegd in 1952 waarin besloten moest worden of het Manas epos een ‘volksepos’ of een nationalistisch epos was. Een aantal wetenschappers gaf tegengas tegen de tendens de epen als nationalistisch te bestempelen, wat ertoe leidde dat de bestaande versies van het Manas epos dan wel werden veroordeeld, maar dat er opdracht werd gegeven om een nieuwe, gezuiverde versie van het Manas epos samen te stellen uit de bestaande teksten. Deze versie kwam tussen 1958 en 1960 uit in vier boeken en staat bekend als de Gecombineerde Versie (*kurama variant*).

In de jaren zeventig, lang na de Stalinistische zuiveringen, kwam er ruimte voor ongecensureerde uitgaven van het Manas epos. Tussen 1978 en 1982 kwamen vier boeken van Sagımbai’s versie uit, en tussen 1981 en 1991 verschenen vijf boeken met de versie van Sayakbai. Ook in deze boeken was de poëzie zwaar geredigeerd, maar volgens de samenstellers lagen hier slechts esthetische en praktische redenen aan ten grondslag. In de jaren negentig werd echter wederom begonnen met het uitgeven van de ‘volledige versies’ van Sagımbai en Sayakbai.

De nieuw uitgegeven Manasteksten werden vertaald naar het Russisch en een aantal andere Sovjettalen. In Engeland vertaalde Arthur Hatto de negentiende-eeuwse Manasteksten die Valikhanov en Radloff verzameld hadden naar het Engels. Vanuit zijn achtergrond als klassiek linguïst zag hij deze teksten als de ware traditie en latere versies als ‘nationalistische vervalsingen’ van inferieure kwaliteit, daarbij voorbijgaand aan het dynamisch karakter van orale tradities die zich voortdurend ontwikkelen. Hatto koos als enige vertaler voor een proza vertaling om de betekenis zo precies mogelijk weer te kunnen geven. Russische vertalers gebruikten versregels om de sfeer van het epos over te brengen. Ook Walter May die een Engelse vertaling maakte van Sagımbai’s versie in het kader van het ‘Manas 1000’ festival in 1995 koos voor poëzie, en maakte gebruik van eindrijm en alliteratie.

Na de onafhankelijkheid kwamen de academische instituten die in de Sovjettijd Manaspublicaties verzorgden in financiële problemen. Hun rol werd overgenomen door internationale organisaties zoals UNESCO, buitenlandse NGO’s zoals *the Soros Foundation* en individuele Kirgizische zakenmensen. Soms geven Manaschīs volksedities

van hun versies in eigen beheer uit. Ook al heeft het bestaan van geschreven Manasversies de status van het epos sterk verhoogd, het lijkt er op dat de boeken zelden worden gelezen. In de Sovjettijd was het publiceren van Manasteksten één van de belangrijkste bezigheden van Manaswetenschappers. Met het uitdragen van theoretische inzichten moesten zij uitkijken. Theoretische stromingen die op het ene moment bejubeld werden konden op het andere als verdacht en gevaarlijk worden bestempeld.

Een aantal Manaspublicaties werd fraai geïllustreerd. Deze illustraties zorgden voor nieuwe beelden in de voorstelling van de karakters uit het epos. De meest bekende werden gemaakt door Theodor Herzen, een van oorsprong Wolga-Duitse kunstenaar uit de Kirgizische provincie Talas. Ook andere kunstenaars lieten zich inspireren door het Manas epos en gebruikten het thema in opera's, schilderkunst, beeldhouwwerken, films en romans. In de Sovjettijd kregen kunstenaars en wetenschappers door middel van eretitels en een vast inkomen een hogere waardering voor hun werk dan Manaschïs. Het voordeel van deze positie was dat Manaschïs ook politiek gezien met rust werden gelaten. Het waren voornamelijk de politici die zich inzetten voor publicaties van het Manas epos die gevaar liepen.

Manaschïs beweren echter dat ook niet-Manaschïs het gevaar lopen om door de Geest van Manas gestraft te worden wanneer zij het Manas epos op een verkeerde manier gebruiken. Zij noemen vele voorbeelden van kunstenaars, wetenschappers en politici die stierven tijdens hun bemoeienissen met het Manas epos.

#### **Hoofdstuk 4 Het gebruik van het Manas epos in de politiek**

Heldendichten lenen zich goed voor politiek gebruik, omdat ze een beeldende en emotionele lading kunnen geven aan vaak droge politieke retoriek.

In de negentiende eeuw werkten Manasvertellers vaak op uitnodiging van lokale leiders. Er is echter zeer weinig bekend over de relatie tussen verteller en leider. Waarschijnlijk pasten Manasvertellers de inhoud van hun verhaal aan hun publiek aan. Opvallend is dat in de teksten die Valikhanov en Radloff hebben opgeschreven Manas geen Kirgies is. Manas wordt meestal helemaal niet in termen van etniciteit beschreven, maar als een grote persoonlijkheid of een moslim. Waar er wel iets wordt gezegd over zijn etnische achtergrond is hij soms Nogoi, soms Sart, en slechts één keer zou men uit de context op kunnen maken dat hij Kirgizisch zou zijn. In andere gedeelten worden de Kirgiezen echter belachelijk gemaakt en tegenover Manas gezet. In de vertelling van Sagımbai, die zestig jaar later werd opgeschreven, is Manas echter wel duidelijk een

Kirgies. Etniciteit neemt in zijn versie überhaupt een veel belangrijkere plaats in. Tegenwoordig is het ondenkbaar dat Manas geen Kirgies zou zijn, en mijn suggestie dat het in de negentiende eeuw anders zou zijn geweest stuitte op grote weerstand in Kirgizstan.

Etniciteit speelde een belangrijke rol voor de folkloreverzamelaars van de vroege twintigste eeuw. Ook voor de Sovjets was etniciteit van vitaal belang. Zij deelden het voormalige Tsaristische rijk op in een groot aantal nationale eenheden en verstevigden de etnische identiteit van de bewoners middels taalonderwijs, het vastleggen van ieders etniciteit in het paspoort en het cultiveren van folkloristische symboliek. Dit lijkt tegenstrijdig aan het communistische idee dat klassensolidariteit de nationale solidariteit overstijgt en nationalisme doet verdwijnen. Echter, om het nationalisme de wind uit de zeilen te halen en om Groot-Russisch chauvinisme tegen te gaan werd gekozen voor een ‘nationale vorm met een socialistische inhoud’. De spanning tussen nationale - en klassensolidariteit bleef echter bestaan en dit bepaalde de dynamiek van het aantrekken en afstoten van nationale symbolen. Aan de ene kant werd zo het Manas epos ingezet als een vlag waarachter de Kirgiezen zich konden scharen. De publicatie van Manasteksten en het gebruik van het Manas epos in andere kunsten dienden daarbij als bewijs dat het communisme het zelfbeschikkingsrecht van de naties respecteerde. Aan de andere kant werd het epos sterk gecensureerd in periodes waarin nationale symbolen als een bedreiging voor het communisme werden gezien.

Na de val van de Sovjetunie veranderde de dynamiek van spanning tussen nationale - en klassensolidariteit in een spanning tussen etnisch en civiel nationalisme. In het model van etnisch nationalisme wordt Kirgizstan gezien als het land van de Kirgiezen, waarin alle overige bevolkingsgroepen immigranten zijn. In het model van civiel nationalisme is Kirgizstan het land van de Kirgizstanen, een groep die gevormd wordt door alle inwoners, ongeacht hun etnische achtergrond. Beide modellen hebben een zekere geldigheid bij alle inwoners van Kirgizstan, die allen hun eigen afwegingen tussen deze twee ideeën maken. Hierbij speelden in de jaren negentig twee symbolen een grote rol: de taalpolitiek en het Manas epos. Beide symbolen ondergingen een vergelijkbaar lot.

Voor de onafhankelijkheid had de Russische taal een dominante positie in het openbare leven. Kirgizisch werd vrijwel niet gesproken door niet-Kirgiezen, en zelfs veel stedelijke Kirgiezen kenden ‘hun eigen taal’ niet. In de laatste *perestroika*-jaren werd het Kirgizisch uitgeroepen tot de staats taal. Na tien jaar was de nieuwe taalpolitiek echter niet van de grond gekomen, met als voornaamste oorzaak dat slechts weinigen van de noodzaak

overtuigd waren. Ook al zagen veel mensen Kirgizstan als land van de Kirgiezen, dat moest niet ten koste gaan van de niet-Kirgiezen in het land. Ook was de trots op de moedertaal voor veel Kirgiezen een defensieve trots, terwijl de schaamte voor het niet kennen van Russisch diepgeworteld was. In 2000 werd het Russisch als ‘officiële taal’ erkend, waarmee het in publieke situaties weldra meer gesproken werd dan daarvoor.

Het Manas epos werd na de onafhankelijkheid ingezet als nieuw ideologisch symbool. Het epos moest de eeuwenoude eenheid van de Kirgizische natie verbeelden en een aantal voornamelijk patriottistische waarden uitdragen. Het hoogtepunt van dit propagandaoffensief was het grootse ‘Manas 1000’ festival, de viering van het duizendjarig bestaan van het epos in 1995. Na die tijd verdween de politieke belangstelling voor het Manas epos echter snel. Ook dit valt te wijten aan de dynamiek tussen de modellen van etnisch en civiel nationalisme. Ook al werd het Manas epos in termen van civiel nationalisme gepresenteerd, het was te sterk aan de Kirgizische etnische groep gekoppeld geraakt om een symbool te kunnen zijn voor alle Kirgizstanen. Om de niet-Kirgiezen niet voor het hoofd te stoten gebruikte president Akayev steeds vaker de slogan ‘Kirgizstan, ons gezamenlijk huis’ in plaats van het Manas epos.

Voor Manaschi's had zowel de politieke belangstelling als het wegvallen daarvan weinig invloed op hun professie. In 1995 was de belangstelling dan tijdelijk toegenomen en het festival bracht extra mogelijkheden om te reciteren, maar dat was niet van blijvende aard. Maar Manaschi's blijven het Manas epos vertellen voor hun oude publiek, aangevuld met een aantal buitenlandse journalisten en wetenschappers. De politieke propaganda heeft slechts de oppervlakte van het Manasvertellen geraakt. De onderstroom, die gevoed wordt door dromen, visioenen en persoonlijke toewijding, lijkt een veel sterkere kracht te zijn dan die van politieke grillen.

## **Hoofdstuk 5 Conclusies**

Uit het voorgaande blijkt dat men eigenlijk niet kan spreken van *het* Manas epos. ‘Het Manas epos’ blijkt een containerbegrip dat vele verhalen, uitdrukkingsvormen en betekenissen in zich herbergt. Deze verschillende verschijningsvormen van het Manas epos worden door een aantal factoren bepaald, te onderscheiden in vorm, inhoud, tijd, doel, actoren en betekenis.

Onder de factor *vorm* kunnen we drie uitdrukkingsvormen onderscheiden: de vertelling, de publicatie van geschreven versies en de politieke retoriek gebaseerd op het Manas epos.

De *inhoud* van het Manas epos varieert enorm. Omdat improvisatie een belangrijk onderdeel vormt van het mondeling overgeleverde epos zijn zowel in de vertellingen als de publicaties vele verschillende versies te vinden. Ook de politieke retoriek verandert hiermee van vorm, en die beïnvloedt op haar beurt weer de inhoud. Daarbij is de factor *tijd* van groot belang. Zoals Manas in de negentiende eeuw nog geen Kirgies was is het nu ondenkbaar dat hij dat niet zou zijn. Daarmee kan het epos als patriottistisch symbool gebruikt worden.

Het Manas epos verandert naar gelang het *doel* waarmee het ingezet wordt. Amusement, spiritualiteit en politiek behoeven elk hun eigen vormen en inhoud. Ook is de verschijningsvorm van het Manas epos afhankelijk van de *actoren* die het epos uitdragen. Manaschi's, andere kunstenaars, wetenschappers en politici maken allen iets anders van het epos. Met al deze verschillen is het niet vreemd dat ook de *betekenis* van het Manas epos voor individuen enorm varieert. Dat het Manas epos echter sterk gelieerd is aan de Kirgizische leefwereld staat tegenwoordig buiten kijf. Ook UNESCO heeft deze trend opgepakt toen het de Kirgizische vertelkunst op de lijst van Immaterieel Cultureel Erfgoed zette. Deze zet kan echter ook negatieve gevolgen hebben, wanneer het tot het bevroren van de dynamiek van het mondeling overgeleverde epos leidt. Maar de kans is groot dat ook deze interventie niet veel zal veranderen aan de spirituele component van het Manas epos, hetgeen sinds mensenheugenis als de kern van de vertelling kan worden gezien.

## Curriculum Vitae

Nienke van der Heide was born in Amersfoort, the Netherlands in 1970. She completed her secondary school at CC Groevenbeek in Ermelo in 1989. She then studied cultural anthropology at Utrecht University, from which she graduated in 1995. Her field studies took place in Spain, Scotland and Namibia. She also participated in a post-doctoral course at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland.

In 1996, she received a scholarship from the VSB Fund to conduct field research in Kyrgyzstan. In 1998, she was enrolled in the PhD programme of the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research, which she had to discontinue due to health problems. In 2005, she received funding to complete her doctoral dissertation from the Pieter Langerhuizen Lambertszoon fund administered by the Koninklijke Hollandsche Maatschappij der Wetenschappen.